

Right Idea, Dubious Application  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23  
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The Pharisees have the right idea. They almost always have the right idea. They even, I would say, have the right intentions. They want a better world and they know that order is a key component. If everyone followed the rules, the world would be a much more orderly place. Indeed, the Pharisees are the people we should hire to clean up our corrupt governments. The Pharisees are the people we should put in charge of the financial sectors of our economies. You see, the Pharisees are God's gift to every soul, every family, every institution that needs a watchdog. They are the ones who make the rules and enforce the rules and grace be damned if it gets in the way. And yes, there are times when the scrupulousness of the Pharisees is just what we need in our lives, because we get sloppy with our spiritual practices, lax with our vigilance of injustice, slothful in the stewardship of the temples that are our bodies. How many times would a Pharisee peering over our shoulder commenting on what we've missed have helped us to have done the right thing? No, the Pharisees and their good ideas are not all bad.

But on the other, the right idea sometimes misses the point. Maybe you remember the story of the New York City auto service center with a \$29.95 oil change special. A guy drops his car off one day, and picks it up that evening. Next morning, he's back. The service manager notices but decides not to say anything.

Third day, same guy, same car. Finally, the service manager takes him aside and says, “Sir, you realize you don’t need to change the oil every day, right?” “Of course!” the man replies. “But where else in Manhattan can I park all day for \$29.95?” Some people say that is a true story, and I cringe when I think how much perfectly good oil went to waste everyday until they shut him down, just so he could save a few bucks. Even if that story is not true, people really have done even crazier stuff where the result has strayed far from a good original idea. I believe you can see real life examples every year at the so-called Darwin Awards, the stated criterion for which is, “In the spirit of Charles Darwin, [not Darwin Lopez] the Darwin Awards commemorate individuals who protect our gene pool by making the ultimate sacrifice of their own lives. Darwin Award winners eliminate themselves in an extraordinarily idiotic manner, thereby improving our species’ chances of long-term survival.” Like the guy who died trying to create a chimney-cleaning device by welding a hand grenade to a metal pole.

Biblical speaking, we too often have the right idea, or think we do. Truer words than these were never uttered: “Cleanliness is next to Godliness,” but they are true only if we note that cleanliness is next in order behind godliness, not equivalent to, or ahead of, but in second place, along with every other practice not specifically appointed by Scripture. That phrase is of course not in the Bible, and so, along with others like, “The Lord helps those who help themselves,” and “Spare the rod, spoil the child,” it falls into that category of the traditions of the

elders, stuff which sounds like a good idea, sounds like what's in the Bible, but really isn't in, or required by, the Bible. It is true that "God works in mysterious ways," but that phrase too is not found in the Bible, even though it is a saying we rely on heavily, along with "God never give you more than you can handle." These are all good ideas, but not the stuff on which we should base our faith, or judge the faith of others.

You may have been wondering what happened to my tie tonight, or my razor, or my washing machine. Yep, traditions of the elders. Nowhere in the Bible does it require pastors, or anyone else, to wear specific clothes, or any clothes for that matter. But for the sake of decorum, I figured I'd dress up to some kind of minimum. To tell you the truth, even after six years at ECF, I still feel naked up here without my formal black Geneva gown and clerical stoles which I wore every Sunday for years before coming here. This church is definitely not following the traditions of the elders. Look at you people! Where are your suits and ties, your hats and dresses? We all have our preferences about church and faith, preferences which become hardened into traditions, even if they began as good ideas. I hope you are feeling a little uncomfortable with the way I look; that's the point. Because I 'm pretty sure you are more focused right now on what I look like on the outside than what is found inside your own hearts as you get ready to approach the Lord's Table.

Handwashing before meals, or after visiting the market, is always a good idea. God only knows what kinds of germs we might be receiving and passing on. But of course, it wasn't public health the Pharisees were interested in protecting. They didn't know too much about, or at least weren't primarily concerned with, preventing disease. But that's OK. They still had a good idea. Their idea was to preserve their people's way of life, their religious and cultural distinctiveness in the context of a foreign military and cultural occupation. We wash our hands before eating. Those pagans don't. We know who we are, and we are not them, and we know this because we have followed the rules which show us that we are set apart. They took their inspiration from the Bible itself, from the purity laws that God commanded, laws which helped define Israel over and against its neighbors in a time when that definition was crucial for its survival. But nowhere in the Torah does it say that everyone, or even anyone, must wash their hands before eating. But, you see, cleanliness is next to godliness, and so if purity is good in God's eyes, even more purity is better, and so a human tradition arose requiring the handwashing Jesus' disciples decide to do without.

It is very easy for us to judge the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. What silly men they were, so caught up in ritual and appearance. But all the while we judge the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, we avoid taking a look at our own human traditions, and what they may be costing us. All the while we concentrate on what other people are doing is time that could be spent concentrating on what we ourselves

are doing, the noble endeavor Jesus is recommending to those who will listen.

When we stick to looking at our own human traditions, rather than those of others, we might be able avoid the risk of winning the Shaker Award, (a new award I just created) to honor the church that by the practice of its human traditions, eliminates itself for the overall good of the ecclesiastical gene pool. You may remember the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (USBCSA), better known as the Shakers, a movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century United States, a Christian community characterized by its virtues of simplicity and frugality, not to mention fine furniture and music. In fact, there were four pillars of belief of this community, all of which good ideas, and even partially based on the Bible. They believed in virgin purity, Christian communism, confession of sin, and separation from the world, all of which made for a distinctive Christian life, but a not very sustainable one. You see, they weren't allowed to have children, a human tradition even if from their perspective, and their reading of the Bible, a good idea. And so they died out, and whatever contribution they could have made to making Christians in other traditions live simpler, more frugal lives filled with fine furniture and good music, died along with them.

What seemed never to have occurred to the Pharisees, is that the things that Jesus describes at the end of our passage as those which defile a person, all the fornication, the theft, the murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride and folly we do, these are actually the

traditions of the elders, and that it is far easier to distinguish ourselves from the “pagans” of the world by washing ourselves of these vices, rather than enforcing the rules as we write them, even if they began as good ideas. All adherence to the rules does for us is make us good at keeping rules, and Jesus was never really too good at that himself. As we prepare to come to the table tonight, I want to leave you with the invitation to examine the folly in your life that would lead you to judge others, but leave your own human traditions intact. We’ve already confessed our sin, but I want to leave a little more time for us to be in silence to ask God to wash us clean of all that might defile us, that we might be more able to experience fully the grace offered to us at the table. As a starting point to that time, I’ll end my comments tonight with a poem that captures well the cost both we and the Pharisees would impose on one another when we focus on the wrong human traditions, even if they are based on good, and even healthy, ideas.

The young child grew and blossomed  
Full of love and joy  
Each morning was greeted with a song  
And laughter  
And a glass of spilled milk  
Graciously lapped up  
By her best furry friend  
Under her chair  
And her days were filled with new adventures  
Exploding her horizons  
With each new discovery  
And a fair sampling of dirt

Smeared from soiled hands  
To now soiled clothes  
Until one day  
The clouds seemed to cover the sun  
Differently  
Than they did before  
And she learned not to spill her milk  
Though she never did figure out  
How  
To feed her furry friend  
And one day  
She learned something new about dirt  
And where she could not play  
And where she could not wipe her hands  
She also learned other things  
She could not do  
Until one day  
While sitting there sad  
And very still  
She learned  
She was a good girl

Amen.