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The Idol of Tradition

Eric Forseth

Dordt College, eric.forseth@dordt.edu

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The Idol of Tradition

Abstract

"Bonhoeffer cautioned in his writings about the cost of obedient discipleship and guarding against reducing our religious practices to human tradition."

Posting about honoring God from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/the-idol-of-tradition/>

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The Idol of Tradition

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June 17, 2017

Eric Forseth

Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 100](#)

[Exodus 6:28-7:13](#)

[Mark 7:1-13](#)

When reading the Scripture of Mark 7:1-13, one can be drawn to the challenge of 7:8 where it says, **“You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”** Mark is illustrating here that the disciples were constantly under scrutiny. In this instance, the disciples were criticized for not washing their hands after physical interaction “at the market” with Gentiles.¹ Normally, an external tradition of that “time” had the Pharisees and the priests always washing their hands before food was distributed and consumed by the elders. Mark was also referencing Isaiah where concerns about traditions were specifically addressed, **“They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”**²

Mark 7:10 further illustrates sharing of a previous command, **For Moses said, “Honor your father and mother,”**³ and, “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.”⁴ Then, Mark goes into a description where honoring of a mother or father is characterized by the Pharisees as inappropriate unless it honors a “past” tradition. Mark refutes this practice by saying in verses 12-13, **“then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”**

“And you do many things like that.” This specific portion of the Scripture catches my attention. We are called to evaluate our traditions, and this specific challenge is part of being an obedient disciple. Bonhoeffer cautioned in his writings about the cost of obedient discipleship and guarding against reducing our religious practices to human tradition, as Jesus instructed the young man who inquired about being a disciple in Luke 9:57-62. Bonhoeffer shared, “Discipleship to him (the young man), is a possibility which can only be realized when certain conditions have been fulfilled. This is to reduce discipleship to the level of human understanding. First you must do this and then you must do that.”⁵

There is the ‘that’ word again. Religion by tradition. Discipleship by prescription. Reducing discipleship to human understanding and tradition. After reading Mark’s observation in Scripture, we revisit traditions and weigh whether our traditions align with Scripture. Perhaps you too are becoming more aware of traditions in the calling of being a disciple. Bonhoeffer closes thoughts on this topic by sharing that our answer is found in Jesus Christ versus tradition: “The call to follow (Jesus) means here what it had meant before—adherence to the person of Jesus Christ and fellowship with him. The life of discipleship is not the hero-worship we would pay to a good master, but obedience to the Son of God.”⁶

Prayer: God, it is so easy in your kingdom to accept present practices and allow these habits to become a form of worship that does not honor you. Please forgive us when we have practiced displaced traditions. Please draw us back to Scripture. Help us recognize that everything we do, including traditions, is a form of worship that should honor you. Thank you for calling us back to Jesus Christ and fellowship with him. Amen.

Footnotes

1. Patterson & Kelley, New Testament Commentary. Holman Publishing: Nashville, Tennessee, 2011, pp. 102-103. [↩](#)
2. Isaiah 29:13 [↩](#)
3. Exodus 20:12 [↩](#)
4. Exodus 21:17 [↩](#)
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Cost of Discipleship," Callings (Edited by William Placher). Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, p. 392. [↩](#)
6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Cost of Discipleship," Callings (Edited by William Placher). Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005, pp. 399. [↩](#)