

**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Mark 7:1-13**

*Having standards is a good thing, we say where I come from, so having double standards must be twice as good.*

Now, it is not quite *double standards*, what we encounter with the Pharisees in what we hear today. But it is, nevertheless, a similar logic to that of the saying that since it is good to have standards, it must be twice as good to have double standards; somewhat along the lines that if it is good to honour God by doing what He has commanded, it must be even better to honour Him by doing *more* than what He has commanded; which is really the same as to say that if it is good to honour God by doing what He has commanded, it must be even better to honour Him by doing that which He has *not* commanded. And although it is not exactly a logical conclusion to this line of thinking, psychologically speaking it is, nevertheless, an almost inevitable consequence of this line of thinking, when some make the leap to the conclusion that a better way to honour God than doing what He has commanded might very well be to do what He has actually forbidden!

The Law of God prescribed that the priests were to cleanse themselves before doing service in the sanctuary. This was one of many ways in which the Law showed symbolically that in order to come before God, and to be able to stand before Him, one must be *holy*, that is: entirely clean, free from any and all impurity, unstained by sin.

Now, the Pharisees, the most pious of the people, had concluded that since it was the command of God that the priests wash when doing service at the sanctuary, it would be pious of them, also if they were to wash their hands, or rather: *baptise* their hands, as it is in the original Greek, whenever they were about to eat. That would be a way to make themselves holy, they thought, as if they were priests, although they were not, and to make their whole life holy, as if every meal carried the same significance as the sacrifices in the sanctuary. And while they were at it, why not also baptise cups and pitchers and copper vessels and couches, so as to be even more pious?

Clearly enough, our Lord Jesus was not pleased with this way of thinking. As we hear it today, He cited the Book of the Prophet Isaiah against it: *This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. And: in vain they worship me, when they teach as doctrines the commandments of men.*

Now, to people of our age, it would be obvious what was wrong with what the Pharisees did: they expected others to follow their rules! In our age, the worst crime anyone can commit is to demand that somebody *follow the rules*, the rules of convention or those of nature or common sense and courtesy; that is why so many are so busy breaking the rules and making up their own rules instead, and insisting that everybody else must submit to the new rules they make up. O, and the Pharisees also thought that they were *better* than others because they followed the rules; and that is another capital crime in common culture: for anybody to think they are better than me and fail to acknowledge that I am so much better than they are because *I do whatever I please*.

What our Lord Jesus actually criticised and condemned, though, as He confronted the Pharisees, it was a much more fundamental evil, and a much more *real* one. By treating their own tradition as if it were as important as the actual command of God, they were devaluing the command of God and demoting God Himself! They were ignoring the vast difference between His Word and command and what they themselves thought would and right. And obviously, this is to demote God Himself, and to elevate oneself to being equal to Him. It is to pursue the promise the evil one gave to our first parents, that we ourselves would be equal to God, or at least *almost* equal to Him, in being masters and judges of good and evil.

And once one goes down the path of finding better ways to honour God than what He Himself has commanded, one will eventually end up insisting that the best way to honour God is to ignore what He has commanded and to do what He has forbidden. As when the tradition of the Pharisees taught that to donate to the Sanctuary or the Synagogue what you were supposed to use for caring and providing for those whom the Law of God commands you to care and provide for, that was a better way to honour God than to obey His actual Word and command!

What it really is, of course, is disobedience and ungodliness; and therefore is it that our Lord Jesus speaks so severely against it, as we hear it today that He did: *This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me.*

*The road to Hell is paved with good intentions*, we say, not only where I come from, but also where I have come. And often it is. It might very well be zeal for God and doing good that makes a man spend the time around Church he really should spend with his family.

It might very well be zeal for God and doing good that makes a woman set herself up as a preacher and teacher, even though Holy Scripture forbids that a woman be that. And it might be that they actually believe it, those who say that *love* is more important than what God commands and prohibits in Holy Scripture, and more important than the faith itself.

Most often, though, if not always, the good intentions with which the road to Hell is paved are actually only a cover for doing what you yourself wanted to do in the first place, anyway. For not surprisingly, the way people think they could serve God better than by doing what He commands Christians to do, in Holy Scripture, it will almost always correspond to what they themselves *enjoy*, what they find more satisfying and more fulfilling than to live under the Word of God and serve Him in accordance with His Word and will.

Or it might be that they just do not know what it means to live with God and serve Him. So many of those who are frantically active in Church work seem to have a certain uneasiness over them, do they not, as if they just cannot rest, as if they are always *desperate* to come up with more duties to take upon themselves, more good things to do for the Church, and for God, or just for the common good. And it is difficult to escape the impression that all the things such people do are things they do *instead* of hearing the Word of God, as a way to convince themselves that they really *are* Christian and servants of God, and that they are in His good graces.

Others, on the other hand, who are not quite so anxious about their standing with God, will seek the shallow assurance of *tradition*; if there is room for something in *Christian tradition*, that is: if there are others who live as I want to live, and believe what I want to believe, and still call themselves *Christian*, well, then I can live in any way I want to live, also, and still be *Christian*, and still be saved. I do not have to care about Holy Scripture, or about the Church I pretend to belong to, and certainly not about what the man says, whom God has set to teach me His will and His ways, and commands me to hear and obey. The way I want to live and believe is found within *Christian tradition*, so it is *Christian*; I am good.

Ultimately, of course, it is *unbelief* that makes us to think that we can serve God in better ways than by honouring and obeying His Word and will, and even by *disregarding* His Word and will. It is *unbelief* that makes us to think that it is not from His Word we should learn how it is good and right for us to live and serve Him, but rather from our own thoughts and feelings as to what is good and right.

It is *unbelief* that makes us to think that it is not from His Word we should learn what *love* really is, but rather from our own judgement, that is: from how we have learnt from the godless to think about love and good and evil.

It is the ancient lie of the evil one that we ourselves should be the judges of good and evil. It is his ancient evil lie that God cannot be trusted, so that we cannot know that what He has spoken in Holy Scripture really is good and right and true. And it is his ancient evil lie, also, that we cannot trust the Word and promise of God, which is that full and complete forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings is given to us, freely and for nothing, and eternal life with Him in glory, out of His goodness and mercy alone, and we need nothing more; that we are righteous and right with Him, not through the baptism of cups and pitchers and copper vessels and couches, or anything else we could come up with ourselves, or anything else we could do for Him, but rather through what He Himself has done for us, in our own Baptism, and His.

The Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity, had Himself baptised with us sinners, and baptised into our sin, to take it upon Himself, and bear it for us, and His own judgement against it, and suffer and die, for it and with it, in our stead and on our behalf. And with His sufferings and death He has borne His own judgement against the sin of all sinners, and paid for all sinners the price and penalty for all our sins and shortcomings, paid it in full, and in abundance.

And now that He is again in His glory as God, He promises us all full and complete forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings. He has had us baptised and born anew into Himself and all that He is and all that is His, into His righteousness, His goodness and innocence before God, and into His heavenly Kingdom, and His eternal life. And with His Word He assures us anew, ever anew, of that which He has already given to us: full forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings, and eternal life with Him in His Kingdom, in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

Under this Word He calls us to live, and to learn from His Word of His love to trust in Him, and to learn from Him what *love* is, and what is good and right. *For His workmanship are we*, as He has had His holy Apostle Paul write it, *created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.