

Don't Worship Your Tradition!

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for elevating their traditions above God's commandments. We can make the same mistake today.

Imagine a 17-year-old girl who, despite her youth and inexperience, has just given birth to a healthy and happy baby. She's thrilled that the worst is finally over. The morning sickness, aches, pain and fear of the unknown are a fading memory in light of the gift, the reward for bearing all the necessary pain.

She realizes she can't change the past, but she's finally ready to move on and face her future. As maternal instincts begin to materialize, she curls up with her miraculous bundle of joy, takes a deep breath and nurtures this gift of life.

Suddenly she hears the urgent knocking of bad news on her front door. It's the authorities. They have come to inform the young mother that the next morning she will be punished.

No, she hasn't robbed, killed, stolen or lied. She has, according to Islamic law, committed the sin of having a child out of wedlock. Although she's endured nine months of transformation, she discovers that the real mental, emotional and physical anguish is just about to begin.

Sadly, this is the true story of a young Nigerian girl named Bariya Ibrahim Magazu, who was sentenced to a public whipping of 180 lashes with a cane for bearing a child out of wedlock. The world was shocked by the audacity of her accusers and the severity of her punishment, all in the name of Islamic religion and tradition.

After reading about Bariya, I'm sure you've gasped in disbelief at the cruelty of the punishment imposed on a frightened young girl who had just given birth and was still breast-feeding her newly arrived infant. Yet many women in our

Christian churches continue to bear the brunt of attacks from accusers who “sentence” them for “crimes of passion.” And though spiritual flogging doesn’t leave physical scars, it can scar a person’s mental and emotional state severely.

I grew up in a church that had strict rules of conduct and unwritten laws of discipline for women who were “caught” in sin. A woman who became pregnant out of wedlock was made a public example by those who intended to preserve the facade of a sin-free church.

Regardless of what her duties in the church were—ushering in the sanctuary, singing in the choir, greeting at the entrance—she was forced to relinquish them and take a seat in the back of the church until her accusers found her “worthy” of resuming her position.

Some traditions, which include disciplining women for their sins while their male counterparts are protected from the same public humiliation, are practices deeply embedded in the history of religion.

Unclean Hands

Traditions are built on past rituals that continue from generation to generation. They cause people to develop mind-sets that sometimes become so strong that the truth cannot penetrate the false perceptions.

When Jesus referred to traditions in the Bible, He normally did so in the form of a rebuke. That’s because many traditions produce a stubborn mind-set that is stronger than a person’s ability to receive the Word of God and be set free.

Many times, even in church, we place our traditional values above our God-ordained purpose—which is to meet the needs of the people, introduce them to Jesus Christ and help set them free of sin. Having a self-righteous mind-set can dim the light on your own flaws while illuminating the weaknesses of

others.

In Mark 7, the Pharisees were very quick to point out the so called audacity of the disciples to “eat bread with ... unwashed hands”— a blatant disregard for the tradition of the elders, they claimed.

“Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders.

“Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?’” (Mark 7:2-3, 5, NKJV).

Jesus recognized that the Pharisees were trying to discredit Him through the nontraditional conduct of His disciples, but He responded with a rebuke, saying in effect: “How dare you place your tradition above the teachings of God’s Word and then judge these disciples for eating without washing their hands?”

The Pharisees were prepared to invoke harsh punishment on the disciples for disobeying tradition, but Jesus pointed out their own hypocrisies. He rebuked them for “laying aside the commandment of God” in order to keep their own traditions.

The power of tradition should never be stronger than the power of God residing inside us, which enables us to do His will above the will of our flesh.

Bow and Worship

What if the government passed a law stating that everyone had to bow to other gods during certain times of the year? The Christian church would be in an uproar—many of us would be appalled; some of us would protest.

It doesn't take long for the traditions of men to start masquerading as religious piety and devotion. Do you remember how the children of Israel introduced a golden calf into their worship experience? (See Exodus 32.)

In our world today we see how men's traditions have become religious rituals that are supplanting a relationship with the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Many Christians who would never accept a government-mandated law to bow before other gods have no problem attending ceremonies and vigils where the name of Jesus Christ is not allowed. Most of us see attendance at such events as an innocent way for people to come together as one.

Yet the prideful attitude against God at these gatherings is similar to the attitude Nebuchadnezzar displayed when he commanded his subjects to worship an image.

“‘To you it is commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, that at the time you hear the sound of the horn, flute, harp, lyre, and psaltery, in symphony with all kinds of music, you shall fall down and worship the gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up; and whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast immediately into the midst of a burning fiery furnace’” (Dan. 3:4-6).

Not all traditions are bad, but even the good ones can be abused. Often they cause more harm than good. This dilemma leaves one wondering, Is preserving tradition worth it?

A classic example of a tradition we cling to that is not always beneficial is the gathering of families during the holiday season for fellowship. What if the family is not joyous, and all they do is fuss and fight?

Some family members cannot sit in a room together for more than five minutes without a barroom brawl breaking out. Everyone goes home feeling miserable, but they meet again the

following year to do it all over again.

Why? Because tradition says that families are supposed to be together during the holidays. But at what cost? And what if it's not working?

Why not come up with a different plan for unifying the family rather than subjecting everyone to miserable memories year after year?

Gauging yourself by the Word of God, how many of your personal traditions have put you in bondage and made the people around you miserable? And what about your religious ones?

Believe it or not, even your religion can become a stumbling block if it becomes more important than your relationship with God or keeps you from expressing the compassion of Christ. We are not to condemn based on the traditions of men but to love and forgive according to the Word of God.

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