

**SERMON NOTES**  
**Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 2:21-28**  
***“Tradition and Change”***

**Intro:**

- Terry Fullam: A small-town church in upstate New York had a rector in that church for over thirty-five years. He was loved by the church and the community. After he retired, he was replaced by a young priest. It was his first church; he had a great desire to do well. He had been at the church several weeks when he began to perceive that the people were upset at him. He was troubled.
- Eventually he called aside one of the lay leaders of the church and said, *"I don't know what's wrong, but I have a feeling that there's something wrong."*
- The man said, *"Well, Father, that's true. I hate to say it, but it's the way you do the Communion service."*
- *"The way I do the Communion service? What do you mean?"*
- *"Well, it's not so much what you do as what you leave out."*
- *"I don't think I leave out anything from the Communion service."*
- *"Oh yes, you do. Just before our previous rector administered the chalice and wine to the people, he'd always go over and touch the radiator. And, then, he would--"*
- *"Touch the radiator? I never heard of that liturgical tradition."*
- So the younger man called the former rector. He said, *"I haven't even been here a month, and I'm in trouble."*
- *"In trouble? Why?"*
- *"Well, it's something to do with touching the radiator. Could that be possible? Did you do that?"*
- *"Oh yes, I did. Always before I administered the chalice to the people, I touched the radiator to discharge the static electricity so I wouldn't shock them."*
- For over thirty-five years, the untutored people of his congregation had thought that was a part of the holy tradition. That church has now gained the name, ***"The Church of the Holy Radiator."***
  
- Traditions get started, and people endure traditions for a long time – without even understanding why traditions are carried on the way they are
  
- Then there is this story about the tradition of brides dressed in white
  
- Clara Null: At a wedding we were attending, my granddaughter Melissa asked, *"Why is a bride always dressed in white?"*  
*"Because white represents happiness and today is the happiest day of her life,"* I replied.  
Her next question was: *"Then why is the groom dressed in black?"*
  
- A classic illustration of traditions being passed down void of their original meaning is the following story (James Hewett):
- *A devout Christian man began every day having a quiet time of prayer and Bible reading in his bedroom*
- His cat would cuddle up to him and purr so loudly that it was distracting
- *So he put a collar around his cat's neck and tied him up to the bedpost so that his quiet time would be quiet*
- His daughter continued this tradition of tying her cat to her bedpost during her quiet times
- *Years later her son also wanted to continue this tradition that had meant so much to his mother and grandfather*
- But his pace of life was such that he didn't have time for daily Bible reading and prayer at the start of the day

- *But in order to carry on the tradition – each morning while he was dressing he tied the family cat to the bedpost*

***Thus forms become more important than the faith they are meant to convey.***

- We smile at these kinds of traditions that have lost their meaning, but entrenched religious traditions in the church are no laughing matter sometimes
- *While Beth and I were in Nepal last spring, we had a chance to see the proverbial sacred cow – in fact, lots of them*
- They're all over the place – not only farms but also side streets and marketplaces and stopping traffic on highways and major roads
- *They don't seem to be fulfilling any useful purpose – but no one can do them any harm because they are considered sacred in Hinduism*
- Water buffalo can be eaten in Nepal – but not cows – because cows are sacred and cannot be killed or used for food or leather
- *There are sacred cows in many churches as well*
- Sacred traditions that are untouchable and undiscussable
- *Things that you had better not touch or harm or move or even talk about changing or you will pay the price*
- For some churches, the organ in the sanctuary can be a sacred cow
- *The name of the church can be a sacred cow*
- The type of bread used in Communion can be a sacred cow
- *A certain holiday dinner or tradition or decoration can be a sacred cow*
- A certain version of the Bible can be a sacred cow
- *A certain organizational structure in the church constitution can be a sacred cow*
- A certain time for the worship service can be a sacred cow
- *Sacred cows generally have nothing to do with biblical doctrines – but they will be defended as vigorously as the Deity of Christ nonetheless*
- If you doubt me – try bringing up the subject of dropping the word *Baptist* from our church name at our quarterly meeting today -- and watch the sparks fly!
- *(Actually, please don't – Larry doesn't need any additional stress in leading today's meeting!)*
- Of course, the problem is not traditions – *all churches – and families – have – and need – traditions*
- *Imagine a family – or church – with no Thanksgiving or Christmas or Easter traditions, for example*
- Traditions enrich life and reinforce special memories
- *God commanded His people to observe certain Passover traditions, for example*
- **The problem is not tradition – but traditionalism – giving human traditions the same authority as Scripture // not allowing the wind of the Spirit to blow where He wills to make things new // perpetuating traditions that once were useful but now hinder more than help the growth and mission of the church // refusal to engage in civil dialogue to evaluate whether a certain tradition or program is still strengthening the mission of the church or not**
- At the opposite end of the spectrum is the other danger: ***iconoclasm***
- *Iconoclasts in this sense either want nothing to do with the organized church – preferring to make up their own spirituality and religious practices as they go – or else they view any kind of leadership or organizational structure or church traditions as quenching the Spirit*

- They have no regard for church history or traditions at all – believing that nothing worth emulating happened in the first 2000 years of church history prior to their coming on the scene
- *Some Christians today rarely sing any worship songs or read any books or listen to any speakers who were around prior to 1980 – they have no historical context for their faith – all they know is the spirit of the modern – or I should say, postmodern -- age*
- *Both traditionalism and iconoclasm are spiritually unhealthy*
- One of the 8 characteristics of healthy churches is **Functional Structures**: *The forms, traditions, regulations and organizational structures of the church are designed and adjusted to be useful in fulfilling the church's purpose*
- Churches need organization and structure and traditions – *but in healthy churches those structures and traditions are not perpetuated indefinitely until they become sacred cows -- but rather are evaluated regularly to see whether they are helping or hindering the church in fulfilling its purpose and mission, and then are modified accordingly*
- **The concept of functional structures has to do with changing forms and structures – not doctrines -- in the church in order to help the church stay fruitful and effective in the midst of a changing world**
- Let's look at a couple of texts where Jesus deals with the issue of religious traditions:

## I. THE WORD OF GOD AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

- *One of the worst features of many religious conservatives throughout history is that they want to impose their convictions on everyone else in society*
  - That was the case with the Pharisees in Jesus' day – and that was the case with many Christians in colonial America – *turning their religious convictions into civil law to be obeyed not only by church members but by all citizens*
- that's why Baptists have historically stood for freedom of conscience and separation of church and state
- The Pharisees of Jesus' day had developed elaborate and detailed regulations governing how people should wash their hands prior to eating
  - *The concern was not merely hygiene and public health – but religious purity*
  - Some religious people can't even leave it up to individuals to figure out for themselves how to wash their hands before eating – they have to give them detailed instructions as though coming from God Himself
  - *The Pharisees caught Jesus' disciples violating their hand-washing regulations and used that as an occasion to criticize Jesus*

- Here is Jesus' response:

**Matthew 15:3-6** <sup>3</sup>Jesus replied, **“And why do you, by your traditions, violate the direct commandments of God?**

**<sup>4</sup>For instance, God says, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘Anyone who speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death.’ <sup>5</sup>But you say, ‘You don’t need to honor your parents by caring for their needs if you give the money to God instead.’ <sup>6</sup>And so, by your own tradition, you nullify the direct commandment of God.**

- *The tradition Jesus is referring to here is that of making a vow to give God a gift for the support of the Temple – something like a Building Fund pledge today*

- Nothing wrong with that in and of itself – *we’ve had Capital Funds Campaigns here at Cornerstone -- except that they would then use that as an excuse not to take care of their aging parents:*
- *“I’d love to help you out financially, Mom and Dad, in your time of need – but you see I made this vow to give some money to the Temple –and so I’m afraid I won’t be able to help you out at all. Sorry, but there’s nothing I can do. After all, I need to keep my promises to God.”*
- Sounded pretty spiritual to the Pharisees – **but Jesus was not impressed**
- You see, making vows to give money to supporting the Temple was a human tradition – as such, nothing wrong with it -- *unless it gets in the way of keeping a commandment of God*
- Which it did
- **The commandment to Honor your father and mother takes priority over human traditions**
- **The Pharisees were elevating their religious traditions over the Word of God**
- Here’s what makes this issue so tricky for us
- *The Pharisees were the Bible-believing Jews of their day*
- **This is why traditionalism is so dangerous in conservative Bible-believing churches**
- Because we believe the Bible is the Word of God and accept its authority over us and strive to live in keeping with biblical teachings – we assume that we are
- *In fact, sometimes it’s hard to sort out the difference between human traditions and biblical teachings because we assume that our traditions and practices are biblical because we’re a Bible-believing church*
- And therefore, any challenge – or suggestion of change – regarding our traditions and ways of doing things may stimulate resistance – *why would we want to change something when we’re already doing everything biblically?*
- **It’s easy to say we are a Bible-believing church – it is far more challenging to subject our traditions and practices and structures and policies to the authority of God’s Word and make appropriate adjustments – especially when those adjustments might disturb the peace**

## II. THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

- Jesus frequently got into trouble with the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath – for according to their strict, conservative interpretation of Scripture – *healing was considered work and thus a violation of Sabbath law*
- **The Pharisees regarded the Sabbath as a day for following religious rules and regulations – certainly not for loving one’s neighbor and helping people**
- Well, on this occasion, Jesus got into trouble with the religious watchdogs of his day because his disciples were hungry and picked some heads of grain in a field for a snack while walking on the Sabbath
- *According to the Pharisees’ interpretation of Scripture – picking a few heads of grain was considered harvest work and thus was a violation of Sabbath law*
- Here is Jesus’ response:

**Mark 2:25 - 28 (NIV)** <sup>25</sup>He answered, **“Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? <sup>26</sup>In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”** <sup>27</sup>Then he said to them, **“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. <sup>28</sup>So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”**

- *God made the Sabbath to benefit man's health – physically, emotionally & spiritually*
- *We ignore the Sabbath principle of resting one day out of seven to the detriment of our own health*
- *But if the divine purpose for the Sabbath is to benefit man's health, then how can it be contrary to the will of God to make people well on the Sabbath – or to give the hungry something to eat?*
- **In their zeal to enforce religious rules and regulations, the Pharisees totally missed the underlying purpose of God's Sabbath commandments**
  
- **People are more important to God than rules**
- *Meeting people's needs should be more important to churches than following religious traditions*
- *The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself takes priority over maintaining Baptist traditions or religious rules*
  
- **The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath**
- *Religion was made for man, not man for religion*
- *Churches exist to meet the needs of people – people do not exist to meet the needs of churches*
  
- **And... The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath**
  
- *The Sabbath was God's idea – not man's*
- *The commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy is found in the Bible – in the 10 Commandments, no less*
- **Yet the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath**
  
- *Jesus rules – even over religious rules and church traditions – even over biblical commandments and teachings*
- *You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you ...*
  
- **The Bible is the Word of God and has supreme authority over our opinions and values and convictions and beliefs and reasoning ability**
- *But our ultimate authority is not a Book – and certainly not our man-made doctrinal systems*
- *Our ultimate authority is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself*
  
- *The Pharisees were Bible-believing Jews devoted to upholding the Word of God and teaching obedience to it*
- *But when confronted with God in human flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ – and when confronted with choosing their own interpretations of Scripture or the Person and Word of the Incarnate Lord as their ultimate authority – they chose their own doctrines which they sincerely believed to be biblical*
- **Wrong choice**
  
- **For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath**
  
- **The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, His Body**
- *Not religious traditions // not Baptist beliefs and practices // not Christian doctrinal systems // not church constitutions or creeds or policies // not majority vote of the church membership // not even our own Bible interpretations*
- **The living, reigning Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, His Body**

### III. NEW LIFE REQUIRES NEW FORMS & TRADITIONS TO ENHANCE RATHER THAN HINDER GROWTH

**Mark 2:21-22** <sup>21</sup> **And who would patch an old garment with unshrunk cloth? For the new patch shrinks and pulls away from the old cloth, leaving an even bigger hole than before.**

<sup>22</sup> **And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. The wine would burst the wineskins, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine needs new wineskins.”**

- *No religious traditions – not even religious traditions based on the Bible – can contain the new reality of the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus Christ*
- *New wine needs new wineskins – new life needs new forms and structures – new realities call for new perspectives and new approaches*
- *Whenever the Holy Spirit brings spiritual renewal – there is a need for new forms and structures to give shape and design to that new vitality*
- *It's not that we need to reinvent the wheel over again in every generation*
- *Every generation of Christians can learn an enormous amount from the faith and experiences of our spiritual forefathers*
- ***But we will follow traditions handed down to us only insofar as those traditions serve the continued spiritual development and growth of the church***
- *I don't want my daughters' generation of Christians to repeat all my mistakes and do things the same way I have done them*
- *I want the next generation to hold on to what is good and still useful – but also to learn from the mistakes of my generation and do things better than we did*
- ***No church – no generation of Christians – can say to the next: we have achieved perfection – imitate us in everything – keep doing things the way we have been doing them***
- ***The legacy that one generation leaves to the next is not primarily its traditions or methods or practices – rather the legacy that one generation leaves to the next is its character // its passions // its heart // its core values // its experiential knowledge of God***
- *I don't want the next generation to imitate my outward forms and methods and traditions – I want the next generation to take my core values and beliefs and passions and make them their own and then adapt them and put them into practice in ways that will serve God's Kingdom purposes in their generation*
- *New wine needs new wineskins*
- ***American culture has changed more radically than most of us realize in the 50 years that we have been a church***
- *50 years ago this was still a church culture – most people went to church on Sunday mornings – most people identified themselves as members of some church – 95% of time the same denomination they grew up in -- and it was socially advantageous to be a church member*
- *People would come to your church if you belonged to their denomination – Baptist churches were for Baptists // Lutheran churches were for Lutherans, etc.*
- *By the 1980s & 90s denominational labels were no longer important – and often were a deterrent to people coming to a particular church*
- *People would come to your church if you did church well – churches that excelled in meeting the needs of religious consumers grew*
- ***If you build it – they will come // If you have attractive worship services and programs and facilities – they will come***
- ***No more***

- *We no longer live in a church culture – a culture that supports the institutional church and its values – a culture in which most religious or spiritually-oriented people are looking to affiliate with a church*
- *Most of your neighbors are not in church right now – they are at work or they are at a sporting event or they are raking leaves or they are shopping or enjoying brunch at a restaurant – attending church was not even on their list of Top Ten things to do on a Sunday morning even though they probably believe in God and possibly even in Jesus as the Son of God*
- *That does not mean they are unspiritual – many of them are spiritually hungry – they just don't expect to get their spiritual hunger satisfied in a church because they don't expect to experience or encounter God in a church*
- ***Today's spiritual seekers are not interested in the powerless God of the modern American church***
- *Reggie McNeal (The Present Future): "We have a church in North America that is more secular than the culture... In fact, many people outside the church are more spiritually passionate and enthusiastic about God than many church members."*
- *For 500 years the Western church has been heavily influenced by Enlightenment thinking with its naturalistic, materialistic, mechanistic, scientific worldview.*
- *Maybe God had something to do with creation a long time ago – and maybe He used to perform miracles in the Bible a long time ago – but belief in supernatural causes of everyday events was long ago relegated to superstition and primitive cultures*
- *Modern man – including modern religious man – knows that science and natural law can explain virtually everything today*
- *Christian faith became a rational faith where spiritual maturity is defined in terms of acquiring biblical information and believing correct doctrines and living a moral life and being active in church work*
- ***The idea of the supernatural became as alien and threatening to most churches as to most secular university science classrooms***
- *But the modern, naturalistic worldview of 50 years ago has become the postmodern culture of today – and the postmodern culture is more spiritual and less materialistic – and spiritual seekers today are looking for more than rational answers to ultimate questions – they are looking for spiritual experiences – and they don't think church is the place to find that*
- *What kind of churches are growing in today's world?*
- ***Most church growth is taking place outside North America and Europe – most church growth is taking place in Latin America and Africa and Asia – among churches that are committed to need-oriented evangelism and Kingdom missions and are welcoming the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit***
- ***New wine requires new wineskins***
- *God is doing a new work in the world – people from all over the world are immigrating into Western democracies in Europe and North America*
- *Already the majority of Christians and missionaries in the world are non-white – and soon the majority of Americans will be non-white*
- ***The church of Jesus Christ in the West will either welcome and evangelize and disciple those immigrants – or will be swallowed up by them***
- *Europe is well on its way to a rapid transformation within our lifetimes going from a Christian to post-Christian to secular to majority Islamic culture*
- *Here in the US, the future belongs to those churches and political leaders who effectively reach out to Hispanic and Asian immigrants*
- *The future belongs to those churches who learn how to evangelize and disciple the post-modern generation*

- The future belongs to those churches who learn how to carry on the mission of Christ in the midst of the collapse of church culture as it existed 50 years ago
- ***New wine requires new wineskins – churches that fail to adapt to these new realities will be marginalized within the next 20 years***
- *But what a great opportunity for churches that are Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered – that combine truth with passionate spirituality, and truth with compassionate love – that are outreach-oriented and Kingdom-mission-driven – and develop functional structures for God-filled worship and powerful proclamation of Christ and for developing fully devoted followers of Jesus in an unchurched culture*

(Conclusion):

- *Times change – traditions change – but the core truths of the Gospel and the basic purposes of the church remain the same*
- **Churches will always need to do these things well: worship / fellowship / discipleship / ministry / evangelism and missions**
- **Show slide # 1 from “PDC ABF Presentation”**
- *Cornerstone Baptist Church exists to worship God, proclaim Christ and develop fully devoted followers of Jesus who will extend his love to others*
- *To fulfill that mission statement we have formed Purpose Teams to maintain a balanced focus on the 5 core purposes of the church*
- **Show slide # 3 from “PDC ABF Presentation”**
- We actually have 5 Purpose Teams for adults and also a Children’s Purpose Team and a Youth Purpose Team
- **Show slides # 1 and # 2 from “PDC Slide Update”** (show each one for about 5-10 seconds)
- *We are also in the process of revising our church constitution and by-laws in order to incorporate these Purpose Teams into our church organizational structure*
- Our Constitution Committee has done an excellent job of revising our structures in our Constitution and By-Laws to make them more functional
- *You’ll hear more about that at our quarterly meeting following the potluck today*
- **We are revising Cornerstone’s structures to make them more functional**
- Making these kinds of revisions and changes helps to keep a church young in spirit even when it is middle-aged as Cornerstone is (*turning 50 this year*)
- *Another thing that helps middle-aged churches to stay young in spirit is trying new things and starting new ministries and taking some risks*
- I recently saw on TV a few minutes of a forum with some graduate students and Bill Gates and Warren Buffet
- *What impressed me was how often both Gates and Buffet referred to the necessity and value of a corporate culture that is willing to learn and take risks and fail rather than being afraid of making mistakes*
- It is impossible to be innovative and successful in technology or investing without taking risks and making mistakes and experiencing many failed attempts

- *Taking risks keeps churches young in spirit as well*
- **Show pictures # 3601 # 3347 # 3349 # 3504 # 3350** (in that order – about 3-5 seconds each)
- Here are pictures of Jill going up toward the mountains on the China – Nepal border to go bungee jumping off that foot-bridge – looking down at that river canyon – with a free fall of almost 500 feet
- *No way Beth or I could have done that – at least not now in our middle –age*
- But Jill is a young adult risk-taker
- *She wouldn't be in Nepal if she weren't*
- The mission of Christ will not go forward in the spiritually dark places of the world without a whole army of risk-takers venturing forth where most would not dare to go
- *Churches need a healthy balance of tradition and change – but as churches grow older they tend to become more traditional and less open to change*
- To be effective in fulfilling the mission of Christ in the midst of a changing world – churches need to take some risks – and try some new things –
- ***May Cornerstone stay young in spirit – and fruitful in Reaching Others for Christ's Kingdom – as she turns 50***

Prayer

*“All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name”*