August 23, 2015  
Pentecost 13/Proper 16  
Text: Mark 7:5-9

5 And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ 8 You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.” 9 And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!” (ESV)

Damned Through the Church

The title for the sermon today is “Damned Through the Church.” It’s not something I thought up. It is a title of a book written by John Warwick Montgomery. Worldwide, he is probably the most famous living clergyman in the Lutheran Church-Missouri-Synod. My guess is that most of you have never heard of him.

He is primarily known for his work in apologetics, the defending of the Christian faith. He has 11 earned degrees including three doctorates. He has written over 50 books in eight different languages. The reason you’ve not heard of him is because he is an academician. He’s a professor at several universities at home and abroad. He is blessed with brilliant mind and is a tireless champion for Christ.

In his book he points out that the Church has often taught a false Gospel, a Gospel which, if believed, will send a person to eternal damnation. Hence he titled his book Damned Through the Church.

I want to highlight three of the deadliest eras in Church history. The first took place in the time of Jesus. The people of Israel, the Old Testament Church, were taught to believe in salvation by works.

We see this in our text. Here we meet two Jewish groups, the scribes and the Pharisees. Both had problems with Jesus. He didn’t follow their manmade rules.

By the time of Christ, the scribes had spent 500 years developing their own set of laws (and with it, their own prescribed rituals and duties). These were supposed to supplement biblical Law. But over the course of time, biblical Law gave way to scribal law. It became known as the “tradition of the elders”.¹

So, when Christ’s disciples failed to wash their hands before eating, this was a violation of the “tradition of the elders”. It was, therefore, sin. This was not a matter of hygiene. It was a matter of religious necessity. To do so was to please God; to fail to do so was to sin.

So now the two laws, one Biblical and the other manmade, will butt heads. We read that the Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus a pointed question. They said, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”²
So Jesus will now respond. And he is not going to be nice. He says to them,

“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”

“Hypocrites,” he called them. Why? Because, in following their own rituals, they made a great show of their religiosity, BUT … they ignored the teachings of God’s Word. Instead of teaching salvation by faith in the coming Messiah, they taught salvation by works. They taught that God was more interested in clean hands than clean hearts.

As a result the Jewish people were systematically indoctrinated to hold to the greatest heresy of all, salvation by human merit. The average Jew, then, trusted that by his observance of the required rituals, God would welcome him into the kingdom of heaven. But sadly the opposite was true. Thus, he was damned by the Old Testament Church.

Thus, we see how important it is not to be biblically illiterate and not to blindly accept what some pastors and teachers tell you that the Word of God says. Throughout history the greatest heretics have stood in pulpits and spewed forth their poisonous, deadly teachings.

At the very minimum, your pastor must be trained in the original languages of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. And you should ask your pastor what he believes, teaches, and confesses to be the truths of God’s Word. And for a Lutheran pastor, you should ask him if believes, teaches, and confesses what the Lutheran Confessions teach. If he says no, never join that church. If you are a member of that church, get out of there!

As for me, I take great joy in continuing to study the original languages. I have done so for 30 years. If I didn’t keep studying, I wouldn’t have anything worth preaching and teaching you, God’s people. Moreover, I unreservedly accept the Lutheran Confessions to be the truth. Please understand, this is not a commercial for myself: God’s people need to know what their shepherd believes, teaches, and confesses.

Let’s consider a second era, the time preceding the Lutheran Reformation. This was an age when obedience to the Church itself was seen as salvation. More specifically, the papacy—not Scripture—was seen as ultimate authority.

For example, in 1302, Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal decree known as the Unam Sanctum. The last sentence should shock you. It reads, “Furthermore, we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.” As a result the common people trusted in the Church, not in Christ, to get them to heaven. Thus, they were damned through the Church.

This continued on until the time of Martin Luther. As you know, Luther held that Scripture alone was the final authority for all matters of faith and life. But Rome disagreed. It held that
there were three sources of authority: the Bible, tradition, and the Magisterium (the teaching office of the church) with the pope as its infallible head. In response Luther said ... “Faith in the Word of Christ, … justifies you.” Yes, faith alone in what Christ has done for you is saving faith.

Since Rome still holds that the teaching magisterium and the pope trump Holy Scripture, many still believe that obedience to the Church is the way of salvation. Hence, many continue to be damned through the Church.

The teaching of Luther and the Lutheran Church is that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in the merits of Christ alone. But there are many who sit in Lutheran pews who think that they, not Christ, have to win their own salvation. And despite hearing the truth the devil puts it in their heads to believe a lie. To them, Jesus says, “[These] people honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”

That brings us to the third era where people are damned through the Church. That would be today. In case you haven’t noticed, mainline Protestant churches are pedaling sin-lite. They have for decades. Contrary to Scripture, they ordain women; contrary to Scripture, they teach that homosexual behavior is not sinful; and contrary to Scripture, they see nothing wrong in abortions of convenience.

This is the age where both men and women cheat on their spouses. In fact, Fox News recently reported that 70% of men admitted to infidelity. It also reported that 50-60% of women admitted to having affairs.

Let me be blunt. The Church has ceased to be the Church. Jesus said to his followers, “You are the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13). Salt is a preservative. The Church, therefore, is called to be the moral preservative of the culture. But the Church today wants to be honey not salt!

The reason that so many are damned through the church today is because the Church no longer condemns sin. For the past 40 years, the Church’s biggest desire is to be successful (as measured by numbers) at the cost of being faithful (to God and Scripture).

- If you should say, “What the Bible condemned thousands of years ago does not apply today,” then I say to you, “Hear the words of Jesus, who says, ‘Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law.’”
- If you say to me, “There is nothing wrong with gay sex,” then I say to you, “Hear the Word of the LORD: ‘You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.’”
- If you should say to me, “You are intolerant, and besides, what gives you the right to judge me,” then I say to you, “It is not I who am intolerant, but the LORD God himself who says, ‘Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness.’”

Christ weeps because his Church celebrates what the Bible calls sin. Multitudes will go to
hell because the Church has approved and continues to approve of what the Bible calls sin. The Church doesn’t want to be the Church anymore. It doesn’t want to be different. That’s why multitudes will be damned through the Church of today.

But the good news is that God is merciful to sinners. The cheating spouse, the mother who has murdered her unborn baby, the practice of sexual perversion, and the pastor who teaches heresy—all of them has out-sinned the grace of God. The way of repentance is always open.

Jesus delights in showing mercy and compassion to sinners. Mercy is found on Mt. Calvary. The cross is the central event of human history. It is the ultimate good news. It preaches that you don’t have to pay for your sins because Jesus already has. It preaches that God accounts Christ’s sinless life as your own. Why? Because the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Trusting in Christ brings forgiveness and life, the life that is in Christ, to your souls.

May the gracious Lord continue to bless us through the faithful preaching and teaching of God’s Word. In the name of Jesus: Ἐλέημέν.

**Soli Deo Gloria!**

**Endnotes**

1By the time of Jesus, these traditions were authoritative and could be sinned against. These traditions were still oral in Jesus’ days, but were written down a couple of centuries later. The traditions about washing would be found in the tractate called Yadavim or “Hands” (see Mishnah Yadavim 2:1). What this meant was that the traditions of men had been elevated to the status of Scripture, so that one could be guilty of violating them. Check out chapter 2 of the Mishnah at the following link: http://halakhah.com/pdf/taharoth/Yadayim.pdf.
2See Mark 7:5.
3See Mark 7:6-7, ESV.
4For the full text of the Unam Sanctam, see http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Bon08/B8unam.htm.
8Matthew 5:18.
9Leviticus 18:22. See also Romans 1:24-28, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:8-10.
Isaiah 5:20, ESV.