



Obedience to Tradition

Deut. 4:1-9; Psalm 45:1-9; Mark 7:1-23; James 1:17-27

It is very easy to say we serve God. The problem is that while we may desire to serve God we are faced with traditions that constantly interfere and confuse us in recognizing and doing God's will. Certain things are clear, but applying the principles of God's will and purpose often conflicts with the patterns of life in our society. Without even recognizing it, we put aside the ways of God in favor of the ways of men.

Israel had the right words in their tradition. Every Jew memorized the words of the Shema ("Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength") and many other important passages of the Torah. They were duty bound to remember and follow to the letter the commandments of these passages. At least after the Babylonian exile, they understood the seriousness they should give to obeying the instructions of *Yahweh*. They acknowledged that their way of life was linked to *Yahweh's* reputation among the nations. Their ties to their very land were a reflection of their religious commitment.

With one voice they defended *Yahweh's* uniqueness and universal sovereignty. They fell short, however, in implementing the ethics and morality with which *Yahweh* was concerned. They well understand issues of power and force, but not the weightier matters of mercy, justice and grace. Their love of neighbor was restrained by their hatred of enemies. They focused on their special position as a nation without worrying about *Yahweh's* love for others. They protected their own interests at the expense of others without even acknowledging the violence of their decisions—without acknowledging the conflict between their traditions and God's will.

It has been said that it is with the loose ends with which men most often hang themselves. The people had firmly established the issues of God's oneness and universal sovereignty. They were ensnared, however, with the less developed ethical question of relating to the "others" on the margins of society. They had their religious routines well-established. They went to the synagogue every morning. They discussed the day's text and its interpretation while they worked. They memorized and taught the traditional interpretations of how to apply the texts, but they did not reflect inwardly enough to see their responsibility for the marginalized and those more dependent on the mercy, grace and protection of society's rich and powerful.

James was well aware of the practical issues of a living faith. He understood that faith necessarily requires a transformation in the manner of our interaction. He spoke of generosity. He spoke in restraining the tongue and recognizing that our anger neither comes from God, nor promotes God's will. He spoke openly of the evil we accomplish with our mouths and the violence of our words that run contrary to God's righteous purposes. God purposed in grace and love that we might become new creatures, transformed by God's example of generosity. James applied the example of God's grace and generosity as the pivotal principle of our daily living. Knowing God's words and their traditional interpretations is insufficient to transform our lives. It is in the practice and application of the attitudes and words of God that we begin to experience God's will and the obedience required of us. God's blessing is not for those who follow a tradition or prescribed religious practices. It is for those who live according to God's will as expressed in Christ Jesus.

A religious life which expresses itself in attitudes of violence to others is an empty religious experience. It lacks a basic understanding of the gospel and real obedience to God. Such an attitude was displayed in recent reports of an Arizona pastor praying and wishing for the death and damnation of the current U.S. president. A member of his church took up arms to give legs to the same desire. Both advocated violent attitudes in response to an understanding that the president had violent attitudes. If God's principles militate against violence, anger, and oppression, the means and purposes of God are to care for the unprotected—those who lack voice and position to protect themselves against the violence of others. Claiming service to God, however, these two men failed to understand the basic gospel philosophy of overcoming evil with good, hate with love. One avoids being stained by the world not merely by denying violent action, but also by actively opposing the violent purposes of arrogance and self-justification.

Jesus came along countering the religious practices of his day. Many observed a detailed set of religious practices. They followed many rules and traditions regarding Biblical interpretation. They had an elaborate system designed to avoid sin and condemnation. At the same time, they did not understand the larger purposes of following God's instructions. They repeatedly washed their hands and foods to prevent spiritual contamination. They did not, however, understand that their personal interactions and relationships condemned them much more strongly than the concerns behind their washing rituals ever could have effected.

They sought ways to get away with avoiding complying with the purposes of God's instructions. They established traditions to avoid God's principles of assuming personal responsibility for the welfare of others. They protected their own interests with regulations and traditions that denied the consequences their actions had on the lives of others. They invalidated the will of God—the God they claimed to love—by isolating themselves from those they should have been protecting and defending. One can hardly honestly worship a God whose will and purposes one works so hard to thwart.

They claimed to promote, protect, and defend God's purposes. Their way of life and interaction, however, contradicted such stated purposes. Jesus called them hypocrites. They claimed and pretended to be one thing, but the character of their actions displayed the emptiness of their words. They were obedient to their traditions, but their lives were far from God.

The traditions to which they clung were designed to keep them on good terms with God, uncorrupted by the world. Instead, they did the opposite. Instead of keeping them in good terms with God, their traditions distanced them by ignoring God's very will and purposes. They faithfully followed their traditions instead of God. Their obedience needed new direction and purpose—a refocus on God.

Obedience is not our favorite word, after all. When it gets down to it, we do not want to obey anyone. We do not really want to let go of the control we desire over our lives, attitudes, and actions. We want to sit in the driver's seat of life, calling the shots and choosing our own way. In order to shift from our way to God's way, we must first go through the humbling process of submitting our lives before Christ Jesus as Lord. It is not enough to do this in name and in word. It is only truly accomplished by releasing control in the hands of the only one worthy to be in control. Obedience to our traditions, heritage, and habits is rarely the same as obedience to Christ. Will we serve him in sincerity? Those who serve God in name and not in character were the ones Jesus called hypocrites.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*