**Mark 7:1-13 August 22 2021**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for this morning comes from the Gospel of Mark the 7th chapter here re-reading these words. “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 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” This is our text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It’s starts when you are a child playing with your friends. You set out to play a game, a game with a set of rules, like basketball, soccer, or football. Even something as simple as hide and seek can fall prey to what comes next as children’s imagination runs wild, or their sense of adventure takes over, or they simply are just tired of playing by the regular rules. So they make up their own rules. If you shoot it from here you get 4 points in basketball. If you hit the bar above the soccer goal you lose a point. If you say a magic word when someone is going to tackle you in football they have to freeze, but only once per game. Kids make up their own rules. It’s fun, it’s different, it means that they are in charge of the game, it gives them authority over what they are doing. As we grow up we do the same thing. We have house rules. We bend the rules. We sit down to play a game of poker and suddenly 2s and 3s and 4s are wild. We have different rules about how different foods are prepared, a house rule that you can’t eat a steak well done, or you can’t put ketchup on it. We love to make our own rules. We impose these unauthorized, unofficial rules in our own lives. We would never miss a Tiger’s game if they made the playoffs. We would always go see the new Tom Cruise movie in theaters. These are not rules that our government has given us or enforces, they’re our rules. We made them. And we obey them. We are the authority.

And when we make up our own rules, as innocent as it may seem for something as insignificant as children’s games, or card games, or sports teams, or movies, it is still a sign of how we as sinful and fallen human beings view the rules in our own lives. We like to be above the rules, we like to overlook the rules that we don’t like and change them, and ultimately we want to be the ones who can create our own set of rules that we will find to be very simple to follow. We see this sort of mentality, this argument for a law of our own making, or a law that we can easily follow in the motivations of the Pharisees and scribes who come to Jesus and immediately point out an infraction of the Levitical law that Jesus disciples are doing.

This scene from the 7th chapter of Mark reminds us of those that who get a bad reputation in social circles, but at the end of the day all they are trying to do is follow the rules. Those who are checking the rulebook when playing board games, or looking up rules on their phone for clarification. The saying goes that rules are made to be broken, or that you can overlook certain rules, but not for these individuals. For the Pharisees and scribes their rules had to be followed and they were very particular about them. The disciples were guilty of a regulation in the Law of Moses that involved washing their hands before eating. The Pharisees took this opportunity to challenge Jesus on his followers following the Law, and instead of chastising his disciples and falling back into the proper behavior in the eyes of these religious leaders, Jesus does something very different. He challenges them, calling them hypocrites, citing the Old Testament against them from the words of the prophet Isaiah, and drawing them away from this small part of Moses’s law to a bigger issue, the problem that we all have when it comes to rules, and the temptation that we all have given into, when it comes to worship.

We say these words in the Service of Prayer and Preaching, and we repeat them so often for emphasis, “Oh Lord, I love the habitation of your house, and the place where your glory dwells.” And then, in our Gospel lesson, Jesus quotes Isaiah from our Old Testament lesson and says. “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.” What is worship? What is the reason we come to this place on a Sunday morning, or a Wednesday night during Advent and Lent? Why do we come here? Is it a rule? Is it a “have to” or else sort of situation? If going to worship is seen as a “have to” sort of thing in your life than the chances are you have fallen into the group that Jesus is describing here in the words of Isaiah. “Their heart is far from me, in vain do they worship me.” Is your heart far from Jesus? Is your heart right now, drifting away to some other place, some other moment, some other thing that is coming up in your week, or your month, or even today? Is worship just something that you do because you have to, because it’s a requirement, because it’s a rule? And before we start looking over at others, and pointing out their hardness of heart, their attitude toward worship, their neglect of God’s Word, and the Lord’s Supper, let’s take a moment to recognize, that we are no better than the Pharisees who were looking at the disciples and what they were doing wrong rather than their own need to repent of their failure and their breaking of God’s Law.

That’s the truth of it. We all are guilty of breaking God’s Law. We all have left behind the commandments of God and instead held to the traditions of men. We all love to adopt a mentality that weighs actions against each other, where sure we have broken some commandments, but we’ve also kept other ones and in the end, they all should balance out. Just like children, who don’t want to play regulation basketball, or football, or soccer, but instead make up their own rules for their own game, we don’t like the idea that we can’t have any other Gods, or that we have to Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy, or that we can’t spread lies about our neighbor, so we make up our own rules. Our own commandments. We make good, good enough. Because perfection is impossible, and we want to take credit for our salvation. But all of this is the same vanity that Jesus is talking about with the Pharisees. All of this is futile and pointless, the idea that we could hide the truth of our sin from God or that we could possibly tell God what the rules are. Listen to these words from Isaiah, “Ah, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say ‘Who sees us? Who knows us? You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, He did not make me, or the thing formed say to him who formed it, He has no understanding.” Isaiah describes a secret life filled with sin and an attitude toward God that puts him underneath our own wisdom. And we all have sinned in this way, and we all must come to God in repentance.

Because the reason we come here, isn’t because it’s a law, or a rule. It’s not a have to, it’s a get to. And a wondrous “get to” it is. “Oh Lord, I love the habitation of your house, and the place where your glory dwells.” We come here, because God dwells here. Where two or three are gathered, here He is among us. Here He is speaking to us, as he did this morning through his holy word. Where he called the Pharisees and scribes to repentance speaking the truth to them, calling them out their hypocrisy and focusing them on the commandments of God rather than the traditions of men. Because in the commandments of God, in the impossibility of perfection that is set before us in the 10 commandments, in the forbidding of our worship of other gods, including ourselves. In the call for us to Remember the Sabbath day and make it holy, and to not spread lies about our neighbor but to even defend them and help their reputation. We see our failure. We see our breaking of the rules, and our need for a Savior. The Law doesn’t save us from our sin, but it is good and wise because it points us to the skies. To the lofty heights of perfection and divine goodness which is our God. Who sent his Son, Jesus Christ, the perfect, sinless, almighty Savior, to be perfect for you. Jesus has overcome all the rules, all the requirements, all of the failures that we have done, are doing, and will do for the rest of our lives. He took upon himself the punishment for our disregard for the rules and the sins that we attempted to hide from him in the deep dark places. He took that punishment upon himself, for you. To save you. To die for you in order that you have eternal life. And now, every week, we get to come here and give thanks to God for that amazing gift.

We get to come here to God’s house, and return thanks in the form of our time, in the form of our treasures, the gifts that he has given us to support us in this life, in the form of our talents to serve him and his church and the community around us. We get to receive from him the forgiveness of our sins when we come, burdened and weighed down with the worries and anxiety and cares of this world that pushes us further and further down each and every day of the week. We get to lay all of that at his feet and receive forgiveness and the strengthening of our faith. We get to receive the support and love of our fellow believers and join in fellowship with them as we worship together. We get to sing songs, Psalms, hymns of praise to God for the life that he has given us. And most importantly. We get to come forward, and receive his very body and blood, shed for the forgiveness of our sins as a promise and testament, that what he said was true, and that in his body we have life. All of these things aren’t rules and regulations, they are opportunities for us, they are gifts to us, they are given to us so freely and with nothing but God’s undying and unending love, that it causes us to say nothing in the face of this gift but “Oh Lord, I love the habitation of your house, and the place where your glory dwells.” May you stay in that love of God’s house, may you remain in the love of Christ as you go out and serve him, and may you remember now and always, that while we try to change God’s Word and his commands to suit our purposes, he has already fulfilled the Law, and given us, eternal life.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.