

“As The Good Book Says”

In the musical “Fiddler On The Roof”, there is one phrase that is continuously repeated. That phrase is “As The Good Book Says”. The reference here is to what the Jewish Bible says concerning life’s issues. “Fiddler on the Roof” is a musical set in the Western region of Imperial Russia in 1905. The story centers on Tevye, the Jewish father of five daughters, and his attempts to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural traditions as outside influences encroach upon the family’s lives. He must cope both with the strong-willed actions of his three older daughters, who wish to marry for love – each one’s choice of a husband moves further away from the customs of their Jewish faith and heritage. As each daughter considers marriage, Tevye is challenged to let go of his Jewish traditions. In fact, one song which Tevye repeats in frustration is called “Tradition”. When struggling to cope with the changes that are occurring, Tevye cries out in defiance “Tradition” as a last ditch attempt to justify standing firm on Jewish customs. He describes the changing Jewish traditions as being as precarious as a “fiddler perched on a roof”.

It is comforting that Tevye refers back to “the Good Book” and what it says. Unfortunately for him, “The Good Book” does not always justify the traditions he wishes to hold onto and therefore he is forced to let go of that tradition. When his third daughter wants to marry a non-jewish man, as he is again asked to give up on his Jewish traditions, he cries out in despair, “If I am asked to bend any more, I will break”. Tevye recognized that there were some traditions he could let go of, but only to a well defined point. He saw it was to his advantage to accept a change in tradition as long as it was not in conflict with the “Good Book”.

Is it that uncommon that we also hold onto traditions that are not justified according to “the Good Book”? Do we insist on having things our way for the sake of tradition, or custom, or practice? Humility on our part would not permit that to occur. Jesus dealt with this issue as noted in Matthew 12 starting at verse 1. *“At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. 2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” 3 He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. 5 Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? 6 I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. 7 If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent.*

In this one example Jesus referred the Pharisees to “the Good Book” to point out their error of placing tradition over scripture and in essence, condemned the complaint of the Pharisees. It is to our benefit to carefully examine our “traditions” and insure that we are not led into the same mistake of the Pharisees - placing tradition above what God’s Word says. Some would refer to a “blind adherence to tradition” as “legalism”.

Jesus also dealt with the legalism of the Pharisees in Matthew chapter 12 where in verse 9ff it states, *“Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, 10 and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” 11 He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? 12 How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”*

Martin Luther challenged the traditions of his day, specifically with the Roman Catholic church. The leaders of the church had obscured the truths of the Gospel of Christ and salvation by grace through faith by way of false teachings. They had manufactured practices and customs (traditions) that were not part of the clear teachings of scripture. Such practices included indulgences, works righteousness, worship of the saints and Mary, and purgatory, none of which, are supported or found in scripture. As a result, this led Luther to discard the traditions and take a stand for the truth of the scriptures when he said, *“Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen.”* That is another way of saying, *“If I am asked to bend any more, I will break. As the Good Book says”.....*

So, as we consider our traditions, let us refer to the “Good Book” and do “As The Good Book Says” in humility rather than what tradition dictates.

Submitted by the Bethany Elders

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