

# Table Manners

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

September 2, 2018

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

---

In my house, when we're getting ready to eat dinner, I try to be helpful by setting the table. When the boys are around, they might give me a hand, which I appreciate.

You know how it goes. Plate in the center. Fork on the left. Knife and spoons (if you need them) on the right. Napkin under the fork. Beverage glass on the top right at about 1:00.

Why is that? Why do we put these things where we put them? What is the reason for putting the fork on the left and the knife on the right? Really now, it can't be just to make things easier for the lefties.

There probably are good reasons for all that, practical reasons having to do with how dinnerware works and how our hands and elbows work with them. But I can't figure out what those reasons would be.

That's okay. It looks better than having the utensils any which way, with no order or symmetry. And it sure beats having to make it up each time you set the table.

I like a well set table. Even if we're having grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner, I kind of like setting the table properly. It seems to elevate the dining experience, as if to remind all who are seated there that this is a special time,

a celebration to be enjoyed,  
a blessing for which to give thanks,  
an occasion to treat those who eat  
and what is eaten  
with respect.

So we set the table, and sit at it, having washed our hands, and we pass the food, we say "Please," we say "Thank you."

All this reminds us we're not eating alone, but with others. For their sake and ours, we mind our table manners.



Jesus was with his disciples for dinner.

But other people were watching them.

Now, it wasn't like when you're in a restaurant and they carry to your table the sizzling fajitas platter or the onion ring tower or the wedge of Black Forest cake as big as your head, and people at other tables are all like "Ooohh look at that I want some!"

It wasn't like that.

And it wasn't like when you're in a restaurant and a celebrity sits in the table near you and you can't help but glancing over, often, in her direction.

It wasn't like that.

No, what was going on here was that some religious leaders had come out especially to check up on Jesus,

to correct him,  
to criticize him,  
to complain about him,

to see if they could catch him in some mistake, or if not him, then his disciples, who were, after all, his responsibility.

They waited. And they watched. And soon they saw it, and pounced.

“Did you see that? Did you see what they did?”

What did the disciples do?

Did they get into a food fight?

No.

Did they curse like sailors?

Probably not.

Did they put their elbows on the table?

Who cares?

What they did was what they did not do. They ate without first cleaning their hands.

Now, a little explanation is in order here. Because we're all in for being sanitary. A good number of us, for good reason, think it's gross to eat without first washing your hands. And that whole thing about washing the food from the market, and washing one's eating utensils, well that just strikes us as prudent.

Is that what the Pharisees were complaining about? Because if they were, then maybe we should agree with them, and wonder why Jesus would bother to argue back.

But there's more going on here.

Because the Pharisees were complaining not merely about cleanliness but rather about godliness. Theirs was a concern about religion, not sanitation. Or, to be more specific, for them the sanitation was the way in which religious devotion was shown, the godliness demonstrated through and by means of the cleanliness.

What they were wanting to see from the disciples and from Jesus,

expecting to see,  
demanding to see,

was a ritual washing of the hands:

thorough,  
and precise,  
and intentional,  
and formulaic,  
and prayerful.

It was a religious ritual with old roots, a tradition of their forefathers, passed down from generation to generation of rabbis and their students as a means by which they could guard against violating the commandments of God.

This body of religious tradition embraced by the Pharisees has often been called the “oral law,” and it was understood ideally as a means of helping the faithful live according to the *written* law, primarily the law of Moses, including the Ten Commandments but also all the laws and regulations contained in the Old Testament.

This oral law, this “tradition of the elders,” was thought of as a fence around the written law, again, to help one keep it and to keep one from violating it. Not many years after Jesus, a certain rabbi, Rabbi Akiba, said “Tradition is a fence around the Law.... [Tithes] are a fence around riches, vows are a fence around purity; a fence around wisdom is silence” (Mishah Aboth iii. 14).

Now, traditions can be good. Traditions can be helpful. Traditions can contribute to the flourishing of life and guard against its destruction. Traditions can be aids to honoring God and guardrails to keep one from dishonoring God.

But traditions can be bad. Traditions can be unhelpful. Traditions can become encrusted with rust and crusty from misuse. Traditions can become untethered from the reasons that gave them life. Traditions can become idols:

little gods demanding respect,  
irrational spirits demanding loyalty,  
objects of misplaced worship,  
projections of human hopes and fears.

Traditions can become more important than the people whose faith they were originally meant to strengthen:

a means of weakening them,  
binding them,  
burdening them.

As H. Richard Niebuhr said (and I’ve quoted this of his before), tradition is the living faith of the dead, while traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.



A young couple got married. And, among the several fine traditions and good habits they tried to keep, they usually made Sunday dinner a special meal. It was often a roast. And it was most always delicious.

Now, he noticed something different about how she prepared the roast. Sure, she did the typical things, like seasoning it with salt and pepper and maybe a few other spices and herbs. When she had the time, and when the roast needed it, she might wrap it tight with cooking twine. But another thing she did, before she did any of those other things, was that she cut the ends off the roast.

He had no idea why.

After a few times of observing this (as he set the table), he asked her. “Why do you cut the ends off the roast?”

“Because that’s what Mom does,” she replied. “It makes for a better roast.”

He wasn't sure about that last part. But he let it go, and enjoyed the meal.

One Sunday, they had their Sunday dinner of roast beef not at their house but at her parents' house. He watched as her mother prepared the roast (after he had set the table, of course). And when she started by taking out the large carving knife and sawing off a nub on each of the ends, he just had to ask.

"Mom, my do you cut the ends off the roast?"

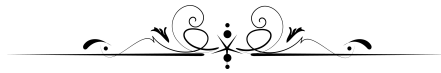
"Because that's what my mother always did. It makes for a better roast."

He wasn't sure about that last part. But he let it go, and enjoyed the meal.

Quite some time after this, the young couple was able to visit grandma. She was no longer cooking, having no longer the strength nor the space to do so.

As they were talking, he couldn't help but ask (as his beloved glared at him, just a little): "Grandma, when you cooked a roast for dinner, you cut the ends off the roast before putting it in the oven. Why did you do that?"

"Well, dear, it's because I had a small oven and small roasting pans, and the roasts from the butcher just wouldn't fit otherwise."



The opponents of Jesus had elevated a tradition of ritual cleanliness to the level of holy law, and were using it against Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus saw a problem in all that.

"[T]here is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come."

They were concerned about purity. They were concerned about being unclean. But these appeared to be merely external for them.

It was about their hands,  
not their hearts.  
It was about what they took into them,  
not what came out of them.  
It was about outer appearances,  
not their inner dispositions and motivations.

If the fence around the law had become an excuse to skirt the law, then the fence was broken and needed to be removed.

If the love of law prevented love of neighbor,

loving compassion for others,  
loving mercy for those in need,

then it was no longer love that motivated, and it was no longer the giver of the law who was loved.

If their love for the law led them to hate Jesus, then their hearts were far from God, whom the law is supposed to honor and serve.

Jesus had no patience for the practices of religion that left untouched a heart soiled and fouled.

He had little interest in table manners that were just a tablecloth to hide unsightly moral stains.

And so also today.



Jesus wants table manners that convey on the outside a holiness that lies within, rather than serving as a cover for corruption, a mask for impure people who pretend to be pure.

The table manners Christ expects arise from hearts that love God, attitudes that yearn to serve God.

The table manners Christ expects reflect the joy of those blessed by God, the humility of those forgiven by God.

The table manners Christ expects will have us seeking to be wise and humble about our traditions, using these to grow more and more like Christ.

The table manners Christ expects, and causes to bloom within us, will echo the welcome we've received and extend it to others, making room at the table at which we've been given a place by his own self-giving.

My friends, may God make all of us more on the outside what we are on the inside, and make our insides ever more true reflections of Jesus Christ.