

“The Commandment of God and the Tradition of Men” (Mark 7:1–23)

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We live in a divided age, an age of controversy. I suppose that is nothing new. Human beings have always divided over what is true and what is right. In this country, we have people who believe there is a God and a fixed moral law, and we have people who disagree. And the big question that we should ask, but seldom do, is, how do we know? What standard do we use to measure truth? What standard do we use to determine what is right and what is wrong?

This past week, people remembered the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of Martin Luther King (on April 4, 1968). Five years before he was killed, King wrote his famous, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” He had been arrested for taking part in a protest, and he indeed wrote the letter from a jail cell. In the letter, King wrote,

A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.¹

What he was claiming was that laws were only just if they harmonized with God’s law. If a law was out of step with God’s law, then it was unjust.

If God’s law is right, and anything that is contrary to God’s law is unjust, the question we should ask is, how do we know what is God’s law? There’s a lot of debate about this. Some people believe that we can discover a so-called natural law simply through reason. That may be true. After all, it seems rather obvious that killing innocent people and taking someone else’s property are wrong acts.

But some things are a lot less obvious, and I don’t think we can reason our way to these truths. How do we know what God is like? Could human reason ever discover that God is one Being in three Persons? And how can we have a right relationship with God? How can we be acceptable to God? And once we have a right relationship with God, how do we know how to live in ways that are pleasing to him?

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf.

To know these things, we need God to speak to us. We need him to reveal these truths to us. We have to be careful to distinguish between God’s revelation and man-made rules that don’t harmonize with God’s law. This is true today and it was true in Jesus’ day, too.

Since I’m going to be talking quite a bit about this over the next few months as we look at how the church should be run, I want us to see what Jesus says about this matter. So, today we’re going to look at a passage in the Gospel of Mark.

We’re going to be in chapter 7 of Mark. At this time, Jesus has a dispute with Pharisees, who were Jewish lay leaders who were particularly interested in the law that God gave to Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai, over a thousand years earlier. Not only did they study that law, which we can find written in some books of the Old Testament, but they also upheld oral traditions. These were laws added to the written law. Later, they were written down in something called the *Mishnah*. Some Jews believed that some of this oral law went back to the time of Moses and was passed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. These traditions supposedly explained how the written laws of the Bible could be worked out in practical areas of life. I’ll explain more as we read this passage.

First, let’s read verses 1–5:

¹ Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.) 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?”²

A group of Pharisees and Scribes, who were experts in the Jewish law, came from Jerusalem to Galilee. And when they arrive, they see that Jesus’ disciples ate without first washing their hands. In the eyes of these Jewish leaders, the disciples were unclean, or defiled. The Pharisees and other Jews who followed the oral traditions, on the other hand, washed their hands and when they had been in the marketplace, they washed afterwards. The idea was that marketplace might somehow defiled them. They also washed various things they used when they ate, such as cups and vessels and the couches on which they sat while eating.

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Now, you may think, “Those Pharisees were really into hygiene!” I suppose they were. But to understand why, you have to have some concept of cleanliness in the Jewish religion. If you read through the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, you see how God gave instructions for the Jewish people to worship him. They could only approach God if they were clean. This was particularly true for the priests, the Israelites who mediated between God and the other Israelites. These were the ones who offered sacrifices for sins. They had to wash their hands and feet before offering sacrifices and before entering into the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God (Exod. 30:20–21; 40:12, 30–32).

All of this may seem very foreign to us, but here is the important idea. God wanted to teach the Israelites that sin had made them unclean, and that to approach him, they had to be cleaned up. Sin is both a power at work within us, something that distorts us and makes us spiritually unclean, and sin also refers to our actions. When the first human beings failed to love, trust, and obey God the way that God had intended them to, the power of sin entered into the world. When that happened, a separation between God and human beings occurred. And this is the big problem we all have. All our other problems, such as divisions, fighting, diseases, and even death, can be traced back to the fundamental problem of being separated from God. Our sin—the desires within that lead us to turn away from God and the actions that we perform that are not in step with God’s designs—causes us to be unclean, to be impure. But to approach God, we need to be clean. How does this happen?

Well, I’ll get to the right answer in the end. But the Jewish people thought that they had to perform certain rituals to make them clean. Their thought was that if priests had to wash up before approaching God, everyone should do that. I suppose the idea of washing before one eats comes from Leviticus. In that book, which is mostly a book of laws, the Israelites were told that certain animals were clean and certain were unclean. Eating the wrong type of food would make Israelites unclean. Jews who added to these biblical laws took this idea to another level. If eating the wrong thing could make you unclean, shouldn’t you wash your hands before eating? That’s what “tradition of the elders” told Jews to do.

So, these Pharisees ask Jesus about this: “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

Let’s see part of Jesus’ answer by reading verses 6–8:

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.”

Jesus doesn't say what they want to hear. He says that the prophet Isaiah, who lived over seven hundred years earlier, had written about this type of person. Jesus calls them hypocrites, people who wear a mask, people who act in a way that doesn't line up with what is inside of them. He then quotes Isaiah 29:13, in which God said that the rebellious people of Israel honored him with what they said, but their hearts were in a different place. They worshiped God, but not rightly, because they taught man-made commandments as if they were the commandments of God.

Then Jesus gets right to the point: by insisting on man-made rules, these Jewish leaders have left the commandment of God. And he gives them a specific example of how their man-made traditions cause them to violate the commandment of God. Let's read verses 9–13:

⁹ And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” ’ (that is, given to God)— ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

How do the Pharisees reject the commandment of God in order to establish their tradition? They ignore the fifth of the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and your mother” (Exod. 20:12). This commandment was so serious that failure to obey it could result in the death penalty (Jesus quotes Exod. 21:17). How did the Pharisees ignore the commandment to honor parents?

To answer that question, we have to understand how the fifth commandment was understood. Honoring your parents can mean different things depending upon your age. When you're a child, it means obeying parents. But when you're an adult, and your parents are old, it means taking care of your parents. There wasn't such a thing as Social Security at this time and

there were no nursing homes. It was understood that older people would be taken care of by their parents. Yet the Pharisees observed something called Corban. Corban is a transliteration of a Hebrew word that means “offering” or “vow.”³ The idea is that a person made a vow to present an offering to God at the temple. The Pharisees taught that if someone made such a vow, he could not break it even if the grain (Lev. 2:1) or animal (Lev. 3:1) offered at the temple could help that person’s poor parents. Apparently, the Pharisees said that someone who made such a vow could not break it. This was a man-made rule placed on top of the law that God gave the Israelites.

This would be like if you had elderly parents who desperately needed money for medications or food and you said, “Sorry, Mom and Dad, I can’t help you out, because I already committed to giving my money to the church, because I’m a really generous person. You see, I already made a vow to God. And you know I can’t break that vow. My pastor told me I couldn’t do that.”

Jesus says that doing such a thing is really a way of breaking one of the Ten Commandments. Yes, people were supposed to make offerings to God, but not at the expense of taking care of parents. If your religious duty causes you to dishonor your parents, something has gone wrong. It was right to make offerings to God, because that’s what God’s law said. But the man-made tradition, that someone must make such an offering even if it meant not taking care of parents, actually caused people to ignore something of great importance. That’s just one example of how a tradition could cause people to ignore God’s commandments. I’m sure there were many others.

Why is this wrong? Well, the obvious reason is that it dishonors God’s revelation. It was a failure to understand God’s word. The Pharisees had added rules on top of God’s word, and these traditions overshadowed God’s word. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees. He says,

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.

²⁴ You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!” (Matt. 23:23–24)

³ In the ESV, it is translated as “offering.” See Leviticus 2:1, 4, 12; 3:1; etc.

Another reason that the Pharisees' man-made traditions were wrong is simply because they didn't work. Take a look at what Jesus says in verses 14–23:

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

What the Pharisees didn't understand was that the law that God gave to Israel was given only for a period of time. All the washings described in the Old Testament didn't actually make the Israelites spiritually clean. They were intended to teach a spiritual reality, but they didn't actually work. Jesus makes it clear that it's not what one eats that makes a person unclean. No, it's what is in a person's heart. We are unclean because we have distorted desires. We're proud, we lust, we get angry, we covet, and this leads to all kinds of bad behaviors. These are the things that defile us, not certain foods or whether we have performed ceremonial washings.

Traditions aren't necessarily bad. Traditions simply are things that have been passed down from one generation to another. But traditions that compete with God's word, or even conflict with God's word, are wrong. These traditions often obscure the main points of God's word. At best, they major on minors. At worst, they contradict the clear teaching of Scripture.

There are different ways of doing what Jesus condemned. One example is the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church teaches that God's word came to us through two streams: Scripture and Tradition. Scripture is what is written in the Bible.⁴ According to Catholic teaching, “both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal.”⁵ The Catechism of the Catholic

⁴ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §76, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 24.

⁵ *Ibid.* §80, 26. This is a quotation of *Dei Verbum* (9), the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 18, 1965.

Church teaches that “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God.”⁶

The problem here is that doctrines taught as part of Catholic Tradition contradict what we find in the Bible. There are many examples, such as purgatory, priests not marrying, and praying to saints, just to name a few. We don’t find anything like this in the Bible. In fact, the Bible teaches that after death, those who are united to Jesus have their souls in heaven (Luke 16:19–31; 23:42–43). There is no such thing as purgatory. The Bible also presupposes that church leaders will be married. First Timothy 3 says that an “overseer,” which is another word for pastors or elders, should be the husband of one wife (1 Tim. 3:1) and should manage his children well (1 Tim. 3:4). The word “overseer” is sometimes translated as “bishop” (as in the King James Version). Yet the Catholic Church teaches that the Pope, cardinals, bishops, and priests should be unmarried and celibate.⁷ This is strange, since Peter and the other apostles were married (1 Cor. 9:5). Also, nowhere in the Bible is it taught that there is a special category of saints and that we should pray to them. Instead, we’re taught to pray directly to God the Father (Matt 6:9). Because Jesus is our High Priest, we can present our petitions directly to God’s “throne of grace” (Heb. 4:14–16).

So, in effect, Catholic Tradition overrides God’s word. This reminds me that of something that C. S. Lewis wrote about marriage. He talked about the need for there to be a head in marriage, and the Bible teaches that the husband is the head (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:23). Knowing that a lot of people are against this idea, Lewis wrote,

“[A]s long as the husband and wife are agreed, no question of a head need arise But when there is a real disagreement, what is to happen? . . . They cannot decide by a majority vote, for in a council of two there can be no majority. Surely, only one or other of two things can happen: either they must separate and go their own ways or else one or other of them must have a casting vote.”⁸

In the Catholic Church’s marriage of Scripture and Tradition, it’s Tradition that gets the deciding vote. Tradition is the head, and Scripture is often disregarded.

But Jesus was against such views. He recognized that Scripture is God’s word and that tradition is man-made. The earliest Christian theologians, often known as the Church Fathers,

⁶ Ibid. §97, 29. This is a quotation of *Dei Verbum* 10.

⁷ Ibid. §1579, 395.

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 113.

recognized that there was a difference between Scripture and other teachings. Only Scripture, consisting of the sixty-six books of the Bible, was recognized as God’s word. To confuse man-made teachings with God’s revealed word is to fall back into the same mistake that the Pharisees made.

But Catholics aren’t the only ones who make these mistakes. There are other Christians who disregard God’s word in favor of man-made traditions. One group of Christians who do this like to think of themselves as “progressives.” For them, progress seems to be moving away from the clear meaning of Scripture and what the church has taught for years, particularly with respect to important matters like the deity of Christ, the necessity of believing in him for salvation, and matters of marriage and sex.

The problem with moving away from orthodox beliefs about such things comes back to that idea of standards. To make progress, you must have a standard, or a goal. When you watch football on television, you see a digital line that marks the line of scrimmage. You also see another line that marks where the ball needs to be carried or caught in order to make a first down. And, of course, you can also see the end zone. Progress is moving beyond the line of scrimmage, towards a first down, and ultimately towards the end zone. But so-called progressives keep moving the lines.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man.”⁹ Sometimes you have to go backward to move forward. G. K. Chesterton said we shouldn’t be concerned with progress as much as reform. According to him, “Progress is a metaphor from merely walking along a road—very likely the wrong road. But reform is a metaphor for reasonable and determined men: it means that we see a certain thing out of shape and we mean to put it into shape. And we know what shape.”¹⁰

The Bible teaches us about the right road. It gives us a sense of how things are out of shape and what it would look like for things to be put back into shape. The passing trends of today’s culture are just that: passing. They will change with the times. But God’s word doesn’t

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 28.

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 98.

change. It is a standard that doesn't move. We need to move toward it, and not the other way around.

It's not just Catholics and so-called "Progressive Christians" that tend to ignore God's word in favor of following man-made doctrine or rules. Evangelical Christians do this, too. Newer evangelical churches pride themselves on abandoning stale traditions in favor of being more modern or current. So, they reject what they think are unhelpful traditions like pastors wearing robes or suits, and instruments like organs. That's fine. But what's ironic is that they establish their own traditions and there's great pressure to conform to those traditions. Many of these churches do the exact same things. The pastors have to wear untucked and, often, plaid shirts. They have the same kind of praise bands. They have to project the words they sing on screens. None of these things are wrong, but it's important to see that we all have traditions. And these traditions often overshadow why churches exist, which is to exalt Jesus, share the gospel, and make disciples.

It's easy to talk about other kinds of Christians or churches. But the fact is that churches like ours let traditions overshadow the gospel and our clutching to traditions often hinders the health of the church. And, frankly, that's why I'm preaching this message.

We need to continue to examine how our church is run, how it is structured, and what we do in order to see if it lines up with Scripture or not. When I look at the church's by-laws, I can see some very obvious ways that our church does not line up with Scripture. Those issues will be addressed this year. As I preach through 1 Timothy and take some detours through other passages of the Bible along the way, I'll talk very specifically about changes that we need to make.

Our problem, however, is that we often don't want to make those reforms. We want what we grew up with, what we're comfortable with. We want the old ways. But the old ways, like the traditions of the Pharisees, simply didn't work. They led to a church that was dying. They hindered evangelism. They hindered making a new generation of disciples. And since they were doing that and they're not biblical, they have to go. Otherwise, Jesus will tell our church, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your by-laws!" Or, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to maintain your cherished traditions." The old saying, "We've always done it that way," doesn't matter. What matters is if we're doing things God's way.

The great problem with traditions is that they have a way of overshadowing Jesus. In the end, it's not our traditions that save us. They don't make us acceptable to God. Only Jesus makes us clean. If we have a right relationship with him, one that is marked by love, trust, and obedience, then his death pays for our sin. If we have a right relationship with him, his perfect life is credited to our account. One way to think about Jesus' work on our behalf is to imagine that we have a huge debt that we could never repay God. Let's say the debt is enormous, like the \$20 trillion debt of our federal government. We could never repay that. But Jesus comes along and not only pays that debt for us, but also gives us his infinite riches. Jesus took our defiling sins upon himself and died on the cross so that God could crush our sins without crushing us. It is Jesus' sacrifice that makes us clean.

If we truly know Jesus, we'll have the same view of the Bible that Jesus did. Jesus said that the Old Testament is "God's word" (John 10:35). He told the apostles, his specially-commissioned disciples, that the Holy Spirit would "teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). The Spirit would continue to speak Jesus' words to the apostles (John 16:13). And the apostles and those who associated with the apostles wrote the New Testament, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

If God has transformed us and given us the Holy Spirit, we will follow God's word, not man-made traditions. If those traditions contradict what the Bible says or if those traditions overshadow the major principles of the Bible, then we must reject them. That is why we carefully teach the Bible here. That is why I stress the importance of reading the Bible. We need to know what God has revealed. Anything that hinders us from hearing and obeying God's word should be set aside, even our precious traditions. I would rather hear Jesus say, "You have a fine way of rejecting traditions in order to obey the commandment of God!"