

NCBC Youth Group
December 1, 2019

TRADITIONS AND SCRIPTURE
MARK 7:1-13

Introduction

What has authority in your life? What governs what you do and the decisions you make? For the Christian, the Bible—the Word of God—is our authority. It governs what we do and how we live. Unfortunately, there are many people who claim to be Christians who do not submit to the Bible. They may claim to believe in the Word of God—many so-called Christians make that claim—but they don't live as if the Bible is the sole authority in their lives. It's not just what you profess that matters; it matters greatly what you practice.

Our text today is an account of a confrontation between Jesus and the religious elites, namely, the Pharisees and scribes. It has been awhile since we last saw them clash. In fact, we first started seeing the Pharisees and scribes in the beginning of Mark 2, where they thought Jesus was blaspheming because He forgave the sins of the paralytic. Then, as Mark 2 progressed, in verses 14-17, they accused Him of eating and drinking with the tax collectors and sinners. In verses 18-22, they wondered why Jesus' disciples did not fast. In verses 23 to chapter 3:6, there were two separate incidents where they accused Jesus and His disciples of violating the Sabbath. Their animosity toward Jesus had built up to the point where Mark 3:6 says "The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him."

Their campaign to destroy Jesus began early in Jesus' ministry. That would soon follow with Mark 3:22, where the Scribes claim that Jesus was demon possessed. We don't see the Pharisees and scribes mentioned again until now, in chapter 7.

The Observation

A group of Pharisees and scribes had come from Jerusalem, indicating that this was probably an elite group of religious figures. Jerusalem was the seat of Judaism, so these were probably prominent men. They saw Jesus' disciples eating bread with impure hands, and that displeased them.

For context, let's read the entirety of verses 2-4: The Pharisees and scribes "had seen that some of His disciples were eating their bread with impure hands, that is, unwashed. [3] (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; [4] and when they come from the marketplace,

they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots.)”

The Traditions

At first it may seem quite odd. Are they complaining that they are eating with dirty hands? Is this a sanitary issue? Not at all. This is a religious and spiritual issue. Notice in verse 2 that they were eating with “impure hands.” This means ritually unclean.¹ The Old Testament mandated that priests had to be ceremonially washed,² but it did not require anyone else to wash their hands before eating.

By the way, this is not the kind of cleaning done for sanitary purposes. The official way to administer this kind of washing goes something like this: “First, water was poured from a jar unto both hands with the fingers pointing up, so that the water would run off at the wrists. Then, water was again poured over the hands with the fingers pointing down. Finally, each hand was rubbed with the fist of the other hand.”³ Another commentator says that the water used for ceremonial cleaning was not enough to clean them if they were dirty; you had to first wash your hands to make them physically clean before you did the ceremonial washing.⁴

They also had many other requirements. Verses 3-4 lists a few: the washing of hands, cleansing themselves, washing cups, pitchers, and pots. Now, we ask, where did they get these regulations? Verse 3 offers us the answer: They were “observing the traditions of the elders.”

The traditions of the elders were man-made regulations. It is critical to emphasize that these are man-made, not God given. These traditions were passed down; they were oral traditions. Over time, these traditions and regulations became a measure of one’s spiritual condition. It was all outward. It’s basically saying, “Look how holy I am. I never eat without ceremonially washing my hands. I never travel farther than what is prescribed for Sabbath. I never do this, I never do that, I always do this, and I always do that.”

¹ Cleon Rodgers Jr. and Cleon Rodgers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 82.

² Leviticus 22:6-7; cf. Exodus 30:19; 40:12

³ John MacArthur, *Mark 1-6 The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 341.

⁴ David Guzik, *Commentary on Mark 7*.

These traditions may seem somewhat unnecessary to us, but they took hand washing very seriously. A rabbi was once excommunicated for failing to perform this ritual. Another rabbi nearly died of thirst because in his imprisonment, he used his daily ration of water for ceremonial cleansing.

Hand washing is just one of the many traditions they had. Verse 4 says, “There are many other things which they have received in order to observe.” They didn’t receive these commands from God, yet as time passed, they accumulate so much man-made regulations and traditions that it buried God’s Word.

The Question

Having observed Jesus’ disciples eating with unwashed hands, they proceed to question Jesus in verse 5: “The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk⁵ according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?’” They asked Jesus, their leader, why His disciples were breaking the tradition of the elders (Matt. 15:2), but they were really accusing Jesus as well.

The Indictment

Jesus will answer that question, the question of why they eat with “impure hands,” but before an answer is given, Jesus indicts them for hypocrisy. Jesus goes right to Scripture and quotes Isaiah 29:13. By the way, He calls them “hypocrites,” which is a theater term. The word is translated as “speaks from under a mask.”⁶ This is a very fitting description of the Pharisees. On the outside, they appear holy and righteous, but they are filthy on the inside.

Jesus said this to the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:27-28, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. [28] So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Verse 6, quoting Isaiah 29:13, says, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me.” What they say is one thing, and it matters what we say. However, the condition of our hearts also matters. The issue lies in the heart. Do you truly honor God in your heart, or do you only profess it?

⁵ “Walk” is not literal. It is another way to say, “conduct one’s life.” Rodgers, 82. For example, Colossians 1:10 says, “Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.” (cf. Eph. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:12).

⁶ Rodgers Jr. and Rodgers III, 82.

Would you also be indicted by Jesus for hypocrisy? Do you attend church and youth group, but your heart is far from God? Do you read your Bible and pray, but your heart is far from Him? Do you serve with your time and give with your money, but your heart is far from God? There are many who claim to be Christians and do the things I just said, but their heart is far from God. They are not truly saved. All of the external things they do will never amount to anything and can never be credited to them in entering heaven. We cannot work to enter heaven. Salvation is by the grace of God alone through faith alone.⁷

Furthermore, verse 7 continues, “But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” This, too, is part of Isaiah 29:13. They thought they were worshipping God, and they thought they were pleasing God. But the reality is very different. If anything they were worshipping themselves. God is not pleased with their worship; it’s all in vain. This self-righteous religion does not please God at all. In fact, in self-righteous religions, you worship yourself.

This religion did not come from God. Verse 7 continues: “Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” Verse 8, “Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” Traditions are not inherently evil, but God’s Word is neglected in order to observe tradition, then it is wrong. That’s exactly what they were doing. In verse 9, He continues saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.” Setting aside means reject or cancel. They reject God’s commandment in favor of upholding tradition. They were “experts” at doing that.

The Example

To make Jesus’ point, He cites just one example of how they hold tradition over God’s commandment. He again goes straight to the Bible. This time, He goes to Exodus 20:12 and 21:17. This is the fifth commandment of the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and your mother.”⁸ As children, we need to honor, respect, and care for our parents. That includes the need to provide for them financially if necessary.

Verse 10 continues with the severity of disobeying the fifth commandment: “He who speaks evil of father or mother, is to be put to death.”⁹ Violating the fifth commandment is a crime worthy of death. This shows you the severity of it. This is God’s Word, not some

⁷ Eph. 2:8

⁸ Ex. 20:12

⁹ Ex. 21:17

tradition. However, the Pharisees and scribes violate God's commandment in order to observe their tradition.

Verses 11-12 says, "But if you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' [12] you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother." Corban was this loophole that they designed to circumvent the fifth commandment. Basically, the fifth commandment tells us to honor your father and mother. We should support them if they have need, even financially. However, a son could declare his possessions as "Corban," which means that it is devoted to God. In that case, they don't have to give any of those resources to the parents.

Let's say I have some money, but my parents are also in need. According to what Jesus is teaching here, the fifth commandment would require that I help my parents. The severity of not helping is a crime worthy of death. However, I can declare my money as "Corban," which means I devote my money to God. In that case, I don't have to help my parents because my money is devoted to God.

That sounds righteous doesn't it? Oh, all my savings are devoted to God, and sorry mom and dad. But is that what the Bible tells us? No, it isn't. This is a man-made regulation, a man-made tradition. To those unfamiliar with the Bible, it sounds biblical: After all, we are devoting our things to God. Jesus condemns this practice, and He indicts them for being hypocrites.

Verse 13 sums up their hypocrisy: They are "invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." Matthew adds something in 15:3. Jesus said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" Do you see the stark contrast here? It all started with the Pharisees and scribes asking Jesus why His disciples violated the traditions of the elders. Put it another way, they wanted to know why Jesus' disciples violated the man-made regulations. Jesus asks them why they are transgressing God's commandment for the sake of tradition. Which one carries more weight: God's commandment or man-made tradition? I think you know the answer to that one.

Conclusion and Application

Tradition is not inherently evil, but tradition should never supplant God's word. October was Reformation month. The Protestant Reformation started 500 years ago, and today, we continue to reform. The heart of the Reformation was a return to the Bible. The Catholic

Church taught many things that were unbiblical. They, like the Pharisees and scribes, observed many man-made regulations, but the Reformers discovered that what the Catholic Church taught was not what the Bible taught.

Today, we continue reforming. We always test everything against Scripture. The Reformation is not over. There will always be attempts to add and take away from the Bible. There will always be attempts to inject man-made regulations into God's truth. We must always go to the Bible.

The Catholic Church today is still the same monster it was 500 years ago. It still teaches heresy. It still observes man-made traditions and regulations. Pope Pius IX said at the First Vatican Council in 1870, "I am tradition." Such arrogance is made worse by the fact that tradition in the Catholic Church is on the same level as the Bible. That pompous pope declared himself to be equal to Scripture. They still believe that today. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says in paragraph 82 that "Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence."

I go after the Catholic Church because they believe they are the true church. They are not. They are no better than the Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' days. We need to be careful that not everyone who says they're Christian and not every religion that's labeled Christian is truly Christian.

When it comes down to it, what do you submit to as your authority? The Scripture should be the authority in your life. There are many man-made traditions and regulations even in Protestant churches. I know people who take man-made regulations and measure one's spirituality based on that. We hear people's spirituality appraised by things like, "That man never smoked a cigarette, never cursed, and always went to church." That's great. Hell may be full of people like that. It's not the external presentation that matters. It's the heart that matters. We can do all that, but our hearts can still be far from God. What is the condition of your heart? Are you truly saved and transformed, or do you simply put on a mask, like a hypocrite?