

## Truth and Tradition

Mark 7:1 – 16

**Proposition:** Religious traditions can take priority over the Word of God and hinder us from obeying the Lord.

### Application:

- Without faith in Christ our condition is sinfulness not holiness
  - No religious practice or ritual will ever make us holy before God.
  - We are declared holy through faith in Christ Jesus.
  - We are made holy by the Spirit of God and the Word of God.
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Show video clip *Fiddler on the Roof*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7V2lxFWBqfI>

Traditions – do they exist so we can know what God expects of us? In the passage we are looking at today, we will see it is not tradition that tells us what God expects of us, it is His Word that declares what God commands us to do.

Religious traditions can take priority over the Word of God and hinder us from obeying the Lord. Turn with me to Mark 7:1 – 16.

### I. Tradition can take priority over Truth (7:1 – 9)

*Hand washing and holiness* (7:1, 2): Jesus’s ministry was front page news. He was loved by the crowds in Galilee but despised by the leaders in Jerusalem. When the Pharisees heard about His miracles, especially feeding over 5000 people, they travelled 160 km from Jerusalem to Capernaum, to check on Jesus and try to find fault with Him.

They saw His disciples eating bread, likely the bread left over from the miracle of the fish and loaves. There were no forks and knives the disciples ate with their hands. It was common practice to hand wash for hygiene purposes. But the hand washing ritual the Pharisees were concerned about was not for the purpose of hygiene it was for the purpose of holiness. You may have heard the saying: “*cleanliness is next to godliness?*” That quote may find favor among the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. The Pharisees believed that a hand washing ritual would keep them holy before God. But here lies the problem. Hand washing for the purpose of holiness was never commanded in Scripture. So why did the Pharisees make such a big deal over the ritual of hand washing (Hag 2:11 – 3). The Pharisees believed they were holy by virtue of their status as God’s covenant people and His chosen nation. In their mind their default status was holiness.

*Losing their holiness (7:3 – 5):* The Pharisees believed that unholy things defile holy people. In their mind contact with unclean people could make holy people unclean. For instance, in the marketplace, where both Jews and Gentiles mingled, a holy person might touch an unclean person and even contact with their clothing, would transfer uncleanness. So, if a religious Jew handled money from an unclean person the uncleanness on the money would transfer to the hands of the religious Jew. If he ate his food without washing away the unholiness on his hands, he would render the food unclean and then ingest defiled food and become defiled in himself. When a religious Jew arrived home from a trip at the marketplace before sitting down to eat a meal, he would go through a hand washing ritual. The Rabbi's had a saying, "*better walk four miles for water than incur guilt by neglecting hand washing.*"

The tradition of hand washing was put in place to maintain a holy status before God. Notice in verse five, the Pharisees were not concerned about disobeying the traditions of Moses, they were worried about disobeying the traditions of the elders. They were admitting that their traditions were more important than Scripture. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church holds to a heretical doctrine. The church believes the Pope has the power of infallibility. His decrees have the same authority as Scripture. Take for instance, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. In the 1850's, Pope Pius IX, declared that the doctrine of Immaculate Conception was revealed by God and hence was to be firmly believed as such by all Catholics. This doctrine states that Mary the mother of Jesus was free from original sin when she conceived Jesus in her womb. This explains why Jesus was born without a sin nature. Since Mary was sinless, Jesus was sinless. This teaching is considered authoritative, infallible, without error. If it contradicts Scripture, and it does, too bad. Pope Pius decreed it as a revelation from God, therefore it stands as infallible truth. We need to be careful that our traditions do not trump Scripture. When Scripture and tradition clash, Scripture must prevail.

Jesus refused to submit to this hand washing ritual and I am pretty sure He taught His disciples not to submit to it either (Luke 11:37 – 41). Jesus now goes on to quote a passage from Isaiah to show that we need to be more concerned about a clean heart than clean hands.

*Pharisaic Hypocrisy (7:6 – 9):* He calls some religious leaders, *hypocrites*. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be on the outside what they are not on the inside. Hypocrites falsely represent themselves. They pretend to be holy in public, but in private they are unholy. They are motivated by the praise of men not the love of God. Despite what their lips say, their heart is far from the Lord. On the surface hypocrites appear to be close to God instead they are very far from Him. They are far from Him because they want to be far from Him. They desire the praise of men and desire to keep God at a distance (Matt 6:2, 5; 24:51). Jesus says that the hypocrite is not saved.

Notice in verse nine, Jesus calls it “*your tradition.*” The Jewish leaders were well trained in religious tradition. They went to the best Bible Colleges and Seminaries not to learn Scripture but to learn the body of knowledge related to the traditions of their faith. They neglected the study of the Scripture so they could learn the teachings of the religious experts. We need to be able to discern between what is Biblical and what is traditional; what is the Word of God and what are the doctrines of men (Acts 17:11).

Jesus condemns the pursuit of religious tradition when it causes us to neglect the teaching of Scripture. Anything that becomes an excuse to not obey Scripture is in violation of God. Traditions and practices can cause us to disobey the Lord. The Pharisees quoted the elders, Jesus quoted Isaiah, and now He quotes Moses. He used the Law and the Prophets to challenge the traditions.

## **II. Traditions Can Prevent Us from Obeying the Truth (7:10 – 13)**

*Honour Parents (7:10 – 13):* Scripture teaches that children are required to honour their parents. To dishonour them was so serious in the eyes of the Lord that the consequence was death. And so, Jesus gave an example of how religious tradition can prevent a person from obeying the Lord. He used the example of the *Corban*. In those days there were no retirement funds, no pension plans, no social security. Seniors received financial help from their children. This was one way children honored their parents. But if a son or daughter was angry with their parents or weary of the burden of helping them, they could declare their money as *corban*. The money set aside to support their parents, was instead declared to be a gift devoted to the Lord. It would be like saying, “*Dad, I would normally help you, but I can’t anymore because I have given your support money as a gift to God. So, you will have to find some other way to receive financial help.*” *Corban* is not the tithe. With a tithe we set aside a certain percent of our income, normally 10%, to the Lord. The *Corban* was in addition to the tithe. It was used mainly for building projects – such as building or renovating a synagogue. It was like making a financial pledge to a building project and using the money we would normally give to our parents as the source of income for the pledged dollars.

According to Scripture when a person makes a vow to God it cannot be revoked (Num 30:2). And so, this *Corban* tradition caused children to dishonour their parents and disobey the Lord. This was only one among many examples of how tradition causes people to disobey the Lord.

By quoting Isaiah and Moses, Jesus challenged the traditions of the religious establishment. He condemned the practice of making human traditions equal to the commands of God. He opposed the practice of letting tradition hinder people from obeying the Lord. Not only did Jesus challenge wrong practice, He also corrected wrong belief.

### **III. Holiness is from the Heart (7:14 – 16)**

*Heart of Holiness (7:14 – 16):* The religious Jew believed he was holy because he belonged to God's chosen nation, so he had to do everything in his power to stay holy. He set up rules, regulations, and traditions to keep himself from that which was unclean. But Jesus reminds us that our default state is sinfulness not holiness. We are not born good and then become sinners. We are sinners by nature. No ritual practice, no religious tradition, no good deed will ever change our sinful state before God.

Holiness begins on the inside, in the heart, and works its way out, in our conversation and in our conduct. Only the Lord can make us holy. By the grace of God and through faith in Christ Jesus we are declared holy. When we trust in the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, God declares us righteous. He declares us not guilty. That is called justification. But to be declared holy, to be declared righteous is not the same as being made holy or to be made righteous. We are made holy as we allow the Spirit of God to use the Word of God and cleanse us from sin (John 17:17). When I wash my hands, I use soap and water. The soap removes the dirt from my hands the water washes it away. In like manner, the Word of God is like soap, and the Spirit of God is like water. As we fill our minds and hearts with the Word of God, the Spirit takes the Word and brings about holiness. The Spirit and the Word working together to bring about righteousness in our lives. Good deeds, religious practices, traditions, doing this or doing that for God will not cleanse our sinful conscience. We must forsake the belief that good works cleanses our conscience. Instead allow the Spirit of God to use the Word of God to make us holy before God. The Holy Spirit does not use traditions to cleanse our conscience from sin, He uses the truth of Scripture. It is not tradition that tells us what God expects of us, as Tevya said in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Rather it is the Word of God that declares what God expects us to do. Let us not allow traditions to take priority over the Word of God and hinder us from obeying the Lord.