



Mark 7:1-13

The commandment of God OR the tradition of men?

Mark 7:1 Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem.

2 Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault.

3 For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders.

4 When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.

5 Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

6 He answered and 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 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

8 "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

9 He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.

10 "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.'

11 "But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban" -- ' (that is, a gift to God),

12 "then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother,

13 "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

No people in the history of the world had ever been as privileged as the Jews, as Paul had said in Romans 3:1-2 *"What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God."*

The oracles of God were of course the scriptures, they had received God's word, through his servants the prophets, these scriptures were literally "God breathed" as Paul put it, 2 Tim 3:16 *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

The scriptures were and are in all ways *sufficient*, nothing is missing from them nothing needs to be added. If God's people wanted to be complete, and to have a sure rule and guide for all of their faith, life, and practice they only needed to look to God's word with the eyes of faith. Nothing in God's word

was superfluous or unnecessary; all of it was profitable for his instruction. Nothing should be taken away from it, and the scriptures themselves made it clear that nothing was to be added. That command “Don’t add to God’s word” was an instruction found at many places, such as Deut 12:32 ***“Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”*** but perhaps nowhere as eloquently in Proverbs 30:5-6 ***“Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar.”***

To add to God’s word is unnecessary, but worse, anything that men added as the commands of God and said “this is what God wants us to do” was a lie, and those who proclaimed it were liars.

Now the problem was that by the time Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, that was exactly what the Jews, and in particular, the Pharisees had done. Now in one sense, the Pharisees made the scriptures central in their lives - they were constantly studying the word of God, but not as a means of finding in them the Christ, through whose atoning work they might be saved from their sins, but as a rulebook, by which they might justify themselves. As Jesus had said to them in John 5:39 ***“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.”***

They had spent generation studying, interpreting, and teaching the Old Testament, and as William Hendriksen points out **“The rabbis had divided the Mosaic law or Torah into 613 separate decrees, 365 of these being considered prohibitions and 248 positive directives. Then, in connection with each decree, by drawing arbitrary distinctions between what they considered “permitted” and “not permitted,” they had attempted to regulate every detail of the conduct of the Jews: their sabbaths, travel, meals, fasts, ablutions, trade, relation toward outsiders, etc.”**

These new laws or additions to scripture that they had created they preserved, passed down as traditions from generation to generation. They were so difficult to remember and interpret they required an entire class of scribes who, like the Muslim scholars who interpret Sharia law today, interpreted and applied these Rabbinic traditions. *Rabbi, Would I be sinning if I carried 2 figs to my neighbor on the Sabbath? I’m sorry 2 whole figs would be carrying a burden on the Sabbath. What if I were to cut the figs in half and give each of my 4 sons one piece, then we would not be carrying 2 whole figs after all!* We laugh at this but to this day, many Orthodox Jews follow these traditions and use the same kind of methods to get around them. The Rabbis have declared that to press the button in an elevator would be working on the Sabbath! Never fear, we’ll just have the elevator stop at every floor!

Now in this case the disciples of Jesus were in trouble with the Pharisees for not having observed one of these traditions. That was a ceremonial washing that was to occur before eating. This had nothing to do with hygiene. They believed that if they were in the market place they might accidentally brush against a gentile or a dead animal and become ceremonially unclean, then if they ate with ceremonially unclean hands they would become inwardly defiled, and thus sinful, and then none of their worship would be acceptable. So they got around this by a ceremonial cleansing that involved the pouring of water onto their hands before the meal. We see a reminder of how common this teaching was amongst all the Jews in the narrative of the wedding at Cana **John 2:6 Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece.**

Now an interesting note is the word translated “wash” and “washing” in Mark 7:4 and 7:8, which Baptizo, now I know that you may have heard this word always means “to immerse” but that isn’t true.

Mark 7:4 Unless they “baptize themselves”

Mark 7:8 The washing of pitchers and cups – baptize and “the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.” baptismou.

Rather humorous translation: YLT Mark 7:4 and, {coming} from the market-place, if they do not baptize themselves, they do not eat; and many other things there are that they received to hold, baptisms of cups, and pots, and brazen vessels, and couches.

Not just the disciples but Jesus also did not go through this ceremonial washing, as Luke 11:38 makes clear:

Luke 11:38 When the Pharisee saw it, he marveled that He had not first washed before dinner. (Washed Baptizo)

YLT Luke 11:38 and the Pharisee having seen, did wonder that he did not first baptize himself before the dinner.

The important thing about the word *baptizo* isn’t so much about an object being immersed in water, as water being applied to an object and thus washing or cleansing it.

Now from their point of view Jesus and his disciples had sinned by not following this tradition. These things however were not commanded by God, they were additions to his word, they had no power to sanctify, or to point people to the savior, far from it they encouraged people to trust in their own works their own observance not of God’s law but of man’s traditions. And so it was not the man who knew the Lord and His word the best and followed him with the greatest love and humility who was considered the holiest, but the man who paid the most rigid attention to the made-up traditions of men.

They had gone through a pattern that as JC Ryle pointed out always tends to accompany the addition of human traditions to our worship, first they were **useful** in helping us to observe God’s word and worship him, then they became **necessary** if men were to follow the word of God, and finally they became **idols** – things we will either bow before or be punished.

And as Jesus points out these traditions of men always end up supplanting the true worship of God, and making it “of no effect” and he points out how they used their Corban tradition of dedicating your money to the temple to destroy the requirements of the 5th commandment. But during the Reformation, the Reformers showed how the Roman Catholic traditions and inventions had detracted at all points from true heart religion. The Sacrifice of the Mass replacing preaching, the plethora of holy days detracting from the Lord’s Day, the belief that pilgrimages and relics, sanctified taking away from the ordinary means of grace. Today we are quite capable of doing the same thing with our own traditions, how many people do not believe that they have worshipped unless there is a Choir, a Procession up the aisle, Vestments, Liturgical Call and Response, or on the other side an Altar Call, a Skit, 20 minutes of choruses, and a Guitar Solo? We are just as capable of adding to the word of God as our ancestors.

If we begin to allow human traditions into our worship, there is no telling how far our religion will fall. It was the additions of traditions and the neglect of the word of God that destroyed religion in the early church and the middle ages. We always think “it can’t hurt” but as Paul said “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (1 Cor. 5:6)

Instead we must contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

Applications: Be careful: “Richard Rogers, the Puritan pastor of Wethersfield, Essex, at the turn of the sixteenth century, was riding one day with the local lord of the manor, who, after twitting him for some time about his “precisian” ways, asked him what it was that made him so precise. “O sir,” replied Rogers, “I serve a precise God.”

If there were such a thing as a Puritan crest, this would be its proper motto. A precise God—a God, that is, who has made precise disclosure of His mind and will in Scripture, and who expects from His servants a corresponding preciseness of belief and behavior—it was this view of God that created and controlled the historic Puritan outlook. The Bible itself led them to it. And we who share the Puritan estimate of Holy Scripture cannot excuse ourselves if we fail to show a diligence and conscientiousness equal to theirs in ordering our going according to God’s written Word.” (Puritan Papers Volume 2, 246-47)

This is not *legalism* as if by keeping the law so closely, we justified ourselves. John 14:21 "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him." Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

Remember: “It is just as easy to destroy the authority of God’s Word by addition as by subtraction, by burying it under human inventions as by denying its truth. The whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible, must be our rule of faith—nothing added and nothing taken away.” – JC Ryle

2) Hold to three foundational principles of the Reformation:

- 1) That all authority has been given to Christ, not the church. He alone has the power to command men’s consciences
- 2) That Scripture is sufficient rule and guide for all of our faith, life, and practice, and that by following it “the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:17)
- 3) That the traditions of men have “indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion” Col. 2:23 but are ultimately of no value no matter how antique they are

That was what the Reformation of the Church was all about, getting back to the source so that all of their faith, life, and worship consisted of THE BIBLE, THE WHOLE BIBLE, AND NOTHING BUT THE BIBLE That should be our desire as well.

"The great error of the Church in all ages, the fruitful source of her apostacy and crime, has been a presumptuous reliance upon her own understanding. Her own inventions have seduced her from loyalty to God, and filled her sanctuary with idols and the hearts of her children with vain

imaginings. The Bible cuts at the very root of this evil by affording us a perfect and infallible rule of faith and practice. The absolute perfection of the Scriptures as a directory to man was a cardinal principle of the Reformation, and whatever could not be traced to them either directly or by necessary inference was denounced as a human invention - as mere will-worship, which God abhors so deeply that an inspired Apostle has connected it with idolatry or the worshiping of angels."

[Thornwell, Argument Against Church-Boards]

3) Remember: "I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, "Obedience is better than sacrifice." "In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men," (1 Samuel 15:22; Matthew. 15:9.) – **John Calvin**