



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Wash Your Hands Before You Eat (Mark 7:1-13)

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I went to visit some friends who just had their first baby. Being protective parents, they insisted that before I could hold the little guy that I had to wash my hands (I doubt they are as strict now since they have three). We all know it is a good idea to wash our hands before we eat or pick up a baby or before we do other things. I am sure we are glad our doctor washes his hands after visiting his last patient—before he examines us.

The Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees and the scribes, took hand-washing to a whole new and different level. In Mark 7, they confront Jesus because his disciples do not do as they do. Here's the story:

Mark 7:1-13 *The Pharisees and some of the scribes gathered around Him when they had come from Jerusalem,² and 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 market place, 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.)⁵ The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?"⁶ And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: **THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.⁷ BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.**⁸ "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."⁹ He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition."¹⁰ For Moses said, **'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER';** and, **'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH';**¹¹ but 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;¹³ thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that."*

Almost two years have passed since John the Baptist baptized Jesus (Mark 1). And Jesus has less than a year before his crucifixion. Even though He continued serving the people as a whole, Jesus has begun to spend more of His time and ministry effort with His disciples, preparing them for all that is about to happen to Him. All the while, His confrontations with the Jewish religious leaders will continue to grow in number and in intensity.

In this passage, the term "traditions" pops up five times (and one other similar term: "precepts"—7:7). It is these 'traditions of the elders' that

become the point of strife between Jesus and the Pharisees. And concerning these traditions:

- They were oral regulations concerning the law given to Moses by God (the Mosaic Law) that had been passed down from generation to generation.
- They were thought of as a "fence around the Law"; preserving the integrity of the law. If one obeyed the traditions, it would protect one from breaking the Mosaic Law.
- It was believed that the Mosaic Law simply declared the law, but did not always define "how" the law was to be fulfilled. Therefore, the oral traditions "filled in the blanks."

An example is found in Mark 7 concerning the washing of hands. The Law gave regulations concerning the ritual washing of the priests who were going in to serve in the tabernacle (Exodus 30:19; 40:13; Leviticus 22:1-6). It also gave a command to wash if anyone touched a bodily discharge (Leviticus 15:11). But through the generations, the traditions were added to wash (and wash in a particular way) before eating, when coming home from the market, to wash if one accidentally touched (for it would not be done on purpose) a leper, corpse, idol, tax-collector, woman, Gentile, etc. In fact, 25% of the oral traditions (later written down in the documents like the *Mishnah*) concerned ritual washings and formal purity.

But please note that these washings were not about good health and hygiene. They were simply about rituals and being ritually pure. The Pharisees were quite serious about keeping the law, as seen in their strict adherence of obeying this "the fence around the law"; the traditions of the elders. But what happened? The fastidious keeping of these traditions turned their focus from the Law (and consequently off of God) and to the traditions. Thus, it obscured or perverted the actual intent of the Law. It became a system by which they believed a person was right with God. The believed and taught that God would be happy with someone and bless him, if one held true to these traditions which protected him from breaking His law. And if one did not obey and follow the traditions of the elders, he or she was considered a sinner, an outcast, riff-raff, unworthy of care and compassion or the favor of God.

All this drew out the righteous indignation of Jesus. The Pharisee's pompous question in verse 5 was not expressed because they were concerned about the health of Jesus' disciples. They witnessed this

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“absolute disrespect for the law” and found an opportunity to criticize and confront their Master.

In this study, we will look at Jesus’ direct reply to the Pharisees (in which, He never answered their question). In it, we will find the condemning fallacies of keeping these traditions. In the next study, we will cover Jesus’ discourse to everyone nearby concerning the true source of impurity; which is not dirty hands, but a dirty heart (Mark 7:14-23). In these replies, Jesus lays open the hypocritical heart of the Pharisees. In doing so, Jesus may be laying open wide our own hearts that may be filled with hypocrisy—if so, let us be willing to listen and repent.

THE TRADITIONS ALLOW ONE TO LIVE AS A HYPOCRITE (7:6-7)

First of all, Jesus noted that by living according to the Traditions, the Pharisees lived as hypocrites. He quoted from Isaiah 29:13 which quoted God concerning the nature of His people 700 years before Jesus. Jesus used this same description to describe what was going on in His day: *THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.*

With their lips they extolled God, worshipped Him, sang songs of praise to Him and gave prayers of adoration—all things the people of God were commanded to do throughout the Old Testament. But their hearts were far, far from God. What came through the lips did not match the content of their hearts.

Matthew 23 gives vivid illustrations of what these religious leaders were doing. This chapter takes place in Jesus’ last week prior to His death on the cross. He was in Jerusalem and engaged in a verbal battle with the Sadducees, Pharisees and scribes who tried to entrap Him with questions. They were looking for something they could use against Him in an attempt to be rid of Him; but they were outmatched.

In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus revealed the true condition of their hearts. He promptly used this situation to teach the people where their hearts should be (23:8-12). And then He turned to the religious leaders to give them several broadside volleys that struck home each time. Seven times in seven woes, Jesus called them “hypocrites” (23:13-36), “snakes”, a “brood of vipers” (23:33).

[Warning: Before you model Jesus and label someone a hypocrite, ask yourself: Can I read their mind and do I know their heart—because Jesus did. If you can’t, maybe it would be best not to flippantly slap that tag on someone—more than likely you will need to tag yourself first!!]

In Matthew 23:14, Jesus confronts their pretentious, long, showy prayers; possible prayers like the Pharisee in the parable who said “*God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get*” (Luke 18:11-12). And while they offered such majestic prayers for all to see (Matthew 6:5), they were also conniving on how to cheat some little old lady out of her house. Jesus later said,

Matthew 23:25-28 *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. 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. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

They looked clean, holy and devout on the outside, but the inside is a completely different scene. On the inside they were full of dirt, sin, and wickedness.

So, what are the results of their actions (Mark 7:7)? Jesus said their worship was in vain. Their worship was nothing, worthless, and meaningless to God. They thought they were making good points with God; when in reality, they were building up the wrath of God upon themselves.

Another result was that taught the word of men rather than the Word of God. They taught men’s precepts, ideas, and commands. They could not teach God’s law for that would expose the falsehoods of their own lives.

And that leads to today’s second principle. Not only do the traditions allow people to live like hypocrites in keeping their own rules and regulations without a love or heart for God, they also undercut or undermine the authority of Scripture.

THE TRADITIONS UNDERMINE THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE (7:8-9)

While Jesus gave one example in verses 10-12, He also gave a vivid sampling of the Pharisees actions in Matthew 23.

The law in the Ten Commandments said, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). Proverbs instructed that God hates a lying tongue (Proverbs 6:16-19). And Jesus Himself taught to let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’; vows were not needed (Matthew 5:33-37).

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The Pharisees, though, taught that only when one made the right oath upon the right objects then is he or she obligated to fulfill the promise (Matthew 23:16-22). In other words, a person could purposefully and “legally” deceive someone by swearing upon something that does not “count”. Thus, their traditions undermined the authority of Scripture

Their traditions also let them pick and choose what they wanted to obey. Micah proclaimed, *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6:8) Jesus reprimanded the Pharisees, *For you tithed mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others* (Matthew 23:23). Selective obedience to the things one wants to obey does not honor the authority behind the command. This type of thinking undercuts the truth and authority of God’s Word; ultimately showing a disrespect for God Himself, the author of His Word.

A few years ago, a major church denomination in the United States discussed whether or not they should perform homosexual weddings. The debate, though, was not centered in Scripture, but rather upon interpretations of the denomination’s “Book of Discipline.” The Scripture would have answered that question immediately and clearly, but it was set aside for their own man-made guide book. Some pastors did not like what the “Book of Discipline” said so they were planning to look at making some changes to update it. How solid can one’s standards be if they can change them because one does not like them?

This is the point Jesus made when He stated, “thus invalidating the word of God...” (Mark 7:13a) The Greek word translated “invalidating” is the formal, legal term to repeal or annul. R.T. France writes that “They have actually dared to rule ‘the word of God’ to be unlawful.”¹

But it goes another step further. By looking at the example that Jesus poses in Mark 7, the traditions of the elders not only undermined the authority of God’s Word, but they also prevented people from obeying the actual Word of God.

THE TRADITIONS DO NOT ALLOW PEOPLE TO OBEY THE SCRIPTURES (7:10-13)

Jesus made the audacious statement that the Pharisees (who were known for their “high regard” for God’s Word) are experts at “setting aside the Word of God in order to obey the traditions” (7:9). His illustration concerns oaths and parents. Jesus said, *For Moses said, ‘HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER’; and, ‘HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH’; but 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),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother... (Mark 7:10-12).

The background for Jesus’ example is the Old Testament command to *Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you* (Exodus 20:12). And stated again, *If there is anyone who curses his father or his mother, he shall surely be put to death; he has cursed his father or his mother, his bloodguiltiness is upon him* (Leviticus 20:9).

The Pharisees, though, had set up the “tradition of Corban”. This “Corban” was a distortion of setting aside gifts for God as taught in the law (Leviticus 27:28). In Jesus’ example a son could dedicate his property to God, but still retain control of it and to protect it. T.W. Manson wrote that “A man goes through the formality of vowing something to God, not that he may give it to God, but in order to prevent some other person from having it.”²

When a gift is “Corban” the priests would charge an excessively high penalty fee to get it out of “Corban”, thus discouraging or prohibiting one from doing it. Therefore, if a young person sets aside a “Corban” and then wanted to help their parents in their old age (which is an aspect of honoring them) the religious leaders were of no help. In fact, they stood in the way. Jesus’ comment in verses 12-13 is filled with pointed second person plural pronouns; “YOU no longer permit”, “YOUR tradition which YOU have handed down” and “YOU do many things” (emphasis mine).

Jesus’ indictment in Matthew 23 is more heartrending. He said that people are shut off to the Kingdom of heaven because of the Pharisees, scribes and hypocrites (23:15a). They desire people to follow after them in the keeping of the Traditions, not realizing that in keeping the Traditions, they themselves are in violation of God’s own Word. They are not going into the kingdom and neither do they let others enter (23:13b). In fact, those who followed became “twice as much the son of hell” as the Pharisees (23:15--Jesus’ words).

CONCLUSION

Jesus follows this discussion by teaching the people gathered around that defilement does not come by what or how someone eats, but rather what comes out of the heart (Mark 7:14-23). The heart is filled with all kinds of evil. People need a heart transplant; a new heart, not just an “improved” heart. Rule-keeping and the practice of rituals are unable to produce the change that is needed. And unless a heart is changed, one cannot please

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God. Jesus already hinted at this by saying that their lips honor me, but their heart is far away (7:6).

Friend, legalistic traditions condemn today just as they did back then.

- Extra-biblical rules, regulations, expectations can lead you to live a hypocritical life of heartless, loveless adherence to those rules—all the while you thought you were pleasing God.
- Unbiblical traditions undermine the authority that God's Word claims and demands of our lives as believers—all the while you thought you loved and upheld a high view of God's Word.
- These traditions can also prohibit you from even obeying God's Word—all the while you thought yourself as obedient to God's Word.

Check your heart; check your life. Are there things that you expect from yourself and others who claim to be Christians that are not biblically supported? There are things that should be expected in the life of one who claims to be a follower of Jesus Christ, but those are founded in Scripture. Are you adding anything else? Do you find yourself criticizing those or looking down upon those who don't live up to your expectations and according to your ideals? Compare your expectations to that of Scripture and if you have added (or taken away)—repent, turn from your legalism; and you will find forgiveness.

God can forgive your sins; God can change your heart--are you interested?

¹ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 288.

² James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 210.