



Scripture and Tradition

Key idea:

Jesus taught that Scripture alone is the final authority for God's people; therefore all traditions and extra-biblical teachings and practices are helpful only when they clarify, support, uphold, and submit to the Scripture.

Key text:

Mark 7:1-13

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and ² saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. ³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. ⁴When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" ⁶ He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁷ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." ⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." ⁹ And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' ¹¹ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), ¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. ¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

Key points:

1. The scribes and Pharisees are in conflict with Jesus again, this time over the issue of ceremonial washing of hands prior to eating.
2. Jesus drives home the real issue - the source of moral authority. The scribes and Pharisees thought the teaching of the elders (or oral law) was equal in authority to Scripture, but Jesus claimed the Scripture as the final authority.

3. There are two key “test cases” in this passage regarding how the tradition of the elders (oral law) was undermining the Scripture: ceremonial washings vs. true cleansing from sin, and the practice of Corban gifts dedicated to God on oath vs. honoring one’s parents. In both cases, the tradition of the elders obscured and nullified the actual Scripture.
4. In order to have healthy traditions rather than those that undermine God’s Word, we should remember and do several things:
 - a. All believers and churches have traditions.
 - b. There are good and bad traditions in the church.
 - c. Every single person and church is susceptible to embracing and enforcing bad traditions.
 - d. Good traditions clarify, support, uphold, and submit to the explicit teachings of Scripture but bad traditions come to a place where they obscure, undermine, contradict, or nullify the explicit teachings of Scripture.
 - e. Traditions only remain healthy when they are firmly submitted to Scripture.
 - f. Traditions are a source of wisdom, strength, and vitality while traditionalism ossifies our faith and saps our spiritual strength.

Questions for discussion/application:

1. What part of Sunday's teaching stood out most to you? Why?
2. Why does Jesus initially ignore the specific issue of ceremonial washing and ritual cleanness and instead focus on the issue of tradition and the Scripture?
3. In Mark 7:6-7 Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13. How does this quote clarify the problem with the way tradition was functioning for the Pharisees and teachers of the law?
4. In Mark 7:6 Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites. The Pharisees were outwardly very religious, so how were they hypocrites? How did their use of tradition promote this hypocrisy?
5. The Pharisees claimed that the traditions helped them to uphold and obey the Word of God. Jesus flatly states that those traditions actually nullified the Word of God. Why does He say this? How can I tell if a tradition is nullifying God’s Word rather than upholding it?

5. Why is it impossible to claim that I have no traditions but only follow the Bible? Why is it tempting to make this claim?
6. Why is it important to understand that while traditions are condemned in certain passages (Mark 7:8; Colossians 2:8), they are praised in others (1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Thessalonians 3:6 - the word 'teaching' is the same word as 'tradition' in Mark 7:8; Colossians 2:8)? How does this protect me from extremes regarding tradition? How does it make it more difficult for me to think about traditions in my own life and church?
7. Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition. (Jaroslav Pelikan). Think about this quote. How does it help me in working through making sure I receive good tradition while not falling into the trap of traditionalism?
8. Can I identify "traditions" in my own life, thoughts, and practice that are in danger of eclipsing the Word of God? Are there any practices that are not actually directly taught in Scripture that I have equated with the command of the Lord?
9. Who can I reach out to this week to share the Gospel or strengthen their faith?

For further study:

[Sola Scriptura - The Ultimate Authority of Scripture Alone](#) (October 1, 2017)

[The Power of God's Written Word](#) (April 24, 2022)