

Lifeworld.org

“And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition” (Mark 7:9).

God’s Way or Man’s

Central Truth: What man believes and how he behaves must be determined by the Word of God, not by human tradition.

L556. Date: April 1980. **Text:** Mark 7:5-15, 20-23.

Topic: Christ: Teaching of; Legalism.

There are many things practiced in the field of religion which are called “scriptural,” but which are customs (traditions) that have become hallowed over the years.

Many Christians would find it surprising to seek to find “chapter and verse” for some things they believe or practice. That does not say tradition is evil. Much tradition is based on the experience of God's people. It is custom which has been followed because it is a good procedure to follow. But when tradition comes to have the place of Scripture in what a person believes or how he behaves, it becomes an evil thing.

Baptists have traditions the same as other religious groups. Those are procedures which, though not specifically recommended or described in the Bible, are appropriate in view of the situation in which Christians live and work. It is extremely important that Baptists keep a clear distinction between what is customary and what is Bible principle.

The enemies of the Lord came to Jesus with the question, “Why do Your disciples not obey the tradition of the elders?” Jesus replied to them with a question, “Why do you not obey the Word of God?” That brought the confrontation to a head. From the record of it in Mark 7:1-23 and Matthew 15:1-20, some very important lessons are taught Christians today.

I. THE PROBLEM WITH TRADITION (Mark 7:1-13)

A. Tradition which was originally proper can become perverted through the years (verses 1-4). That was what happened to the custom of washing the hands by the Jews. Leviticus 22:1-16 sets forth the requirement of washing before the priests could touch any of the things which were hallowed to the Lord. The purpose of that requirement was twofold: (1) reverence toward the things of God, and (2) cleanliness to control disease. When a person had touched a leper, or a running sore, or a corpse of man or animal, etc., he was considered unclean until he had washed. That original holy and reasonable ordinance was perverted by tradition until it lost the meaning God had put into it originally.

The requirement of washing the hands had become ritualistic by New Testament times. It no longer related to cleanliness. (One can hardly imagine Jesus eating when His hands were dirty.) It related to custom. There must be a ceremonial washing, not mere cleansing. It was because Jesus' disciples did not go through a ritual of cleansing that the enemies accused them of sin.

B. Tradition which surpasses the Bible makes men "actors" (hypocrites) in religion (verse 6). Jesus called the Pharisees and scribes who accused Him, "you hypocrites." The word (Greek, *hupokrites*) meant an actor. Jesus used it to mean "one whose whole life is a piece or acting without any sincerity behind it." That describes any person to whom religion is carrying out external regulations, but who lacks personal devotion to God. It is a religion content with man's outward actions but which takes no account of his inward feelings.

The rabbis had divided the Mosaic law into 613 separate decrees, 365 considered prohibitions and 248 positive directions. By interpreting those laws, the rabbis had fought to control every detail of life: Sabbath, travel, meals, fasts, washings, trade, etc. They were so enmeshed in the rules of the rabbis that they lost sight of the law of God.

A professional basketball game was being played. One player was fouled and permitted to go to the free-throw line. He bounced the ball a few times, made the sign of the cross on his chest, and took his shot at the basket. That sign of the cross under such circumstances is an indication of the power of religious tradition.

C. Tradition may come to be substituted for the Word of God (verses 5-13). That danger is clearly indicated in the example Jesus gave concerning the obligation to support one's aged and infirm parents.

The fifth of the ten commandments required, "*Honour thy father and thy mother*" (Exodus 20:12), The requirement to "honor" parents means more than to obey them. It means to love, to highly regard, to show respect and consideration to both parents. So demanding and important was that

requirement that to “curse” father and mother was to commit a crime worthy of death (Exodus 21:17). That holy commandment, so clearly stated and easily understood, was violated by tradition.

Tradition declared that 'if a person dedicated something as a gift to God (it was called *corban*), he could not use it for secular purposes. Therefore, a son could say to his needy parents, “The wealth whereby I could help you is *corban*,” and he was no longer obligated to care for them. Think or it! A tradition violating the clear commandment of God with the approval of the religious leaders!

That is the problem with tradition. It sometimes becomes sacrosanct. It might assume the place of authority which is due Holy Scripture only. The Christian can overcome the problem of tradition only as he clearly distinguishes between what is religious custom and what is “chapter and verse” Bible doctrine.

II. THE PRINCIPLE OF PURITY (Mark 7:14-23)

Learn this lesson well: Real defilement is moral and spiritual. A person is not defiled by the length of his hair, or the style of his clothes, or the quality of his food. Things are neither clean nor unclean. Only *people* can be defiled,

“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (Romans 14:14).

A. The principle of purity expressed (Mark 7:14-16). Jesus stated the principle tersely in these words: *“There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile him.”*

The popular opinion of the day was that defilement worked itself from the outside in. One was defiled by whether he touched the wrong thing, failed to wash his hands properly, walked too far on the Sabbath day, etc. Jesus showed that the very opposite is true. He said real defilement is not physical but spiritual. It issues forth from the heart, for out of the heart are the issues of life (Proverbs 4:23).

Today, a great deal is being said and done about pollution of the environment. That is needed. But it is essential that people everywhere know that defilement from within is a more serious problem and seek the cleansing from it.

B. The principle of purity explained (Mark 7:17-19). The disciples did not understand the principle of purity as Jesus expressed it. They asked Him

to explain that “parable” to them (verse 17), for they were sure there was a meaning they did not understand. Jesus responded with a surprising explanation.

Jesus said things of the physical realm could never defile a person spiritually. That was a shattering new doctrine. The whole Jewish system was built upon a list of “clean” and “unclean” animals and practices. Jesus explained that the food one ate went into the stomach and was eliminated from the body by the natural process. It did not enter into his heart (the center of his personality, his spirit). Therefore, it could not defile him before God. Things touched, tasted, etc., could neither commend a man to God nor keep him from God (I Corinthians 8:8). There are no clean or unclean things in the spiritual realm, for spiritual motives prevail there.

C. The principle of purity expanded (Mark 7:20-23). Defiling vices, not unclean things, are what defiles a man. Jesus listed twelve such vices in Mark 7:20-23 (six in the parallel passage of Matthew 15:19). There is no way to group the vices in detail. It is enough to note that the first six (after an introductory reference to “evil thoughts”) deal with actions, while the second six deal with attitudes. A review of the defiling vices will not only enlighten the mind, but it will also fortify the heart against involvement in them.

Most commentators consider “evil thoughts” (verse 21) to be the source of all the rest. The term literally means “bad dialogizings.” It refers to those inner deliberations which decide upon a course of action and pursue it. It is the fountain from which the stream of defilement flows. That is why the Bible says a man is as he thinks in his heart (Proverbs 23:7). The inner thoughts give rise to actions and stimulate desires.

(1) Sexual sins, immoral acts, defile a person (verse 21). Reference here is to any kind of illicit sexual behavior, whether within or outside the marriage relationship. Today, it would be not only immorality expressed in adultery, but also rape, pornographic literature, off-color jokes, etc.

(2) Murder defiles a person (verse 21). Human life is sacred because each person is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26, 27). He who commits murder blasphemes God and forfeits his own right to live (Genesis 9:6). What does that say about the practice of abortion today?

(3) Theft defiles a person (verse 22). That warns us against shoplifting, loafing on the job, cheating on tax reports, embezzling, or withholding offerings from God.

(4) Adulteries defile a person (verse 21). That term includes all violations of the marriage bond, whether by act or by lustful desires (Matthew 5:28).

(5) Covetousness defiles a person (verse 22). It is selfishness in its grossest form, for it desires for self that good which has come to another. It is the spirit which grabs for what it has no right to take.

(6) Wickedness defiles a person (verse 22). That refers to all those malicious acts by which wrong is practiced. It is the mark of a man who is doing Satan's work.

The final six defiling qualities are those drives which produce the actions described above.

(7) Deceit defiles a person (verse 22). That is a term which means "bait," and refers to crafty, cunning, deceitful attitudes and actions by which one works evil to others.

(8) Lasciviousness defiles a person (verse 22). That is wanton wickedness which knows no decency or shame. It is the disposition of the soul that has cast off all restraints.

(9) An evil eye defiles a person (verse 22). That is the spirit of envy which looks upon the good of others with a desire to destroy. It is a soul destroying vice.

(10) Blasphemy defiles a person (verse 22). It is abusive speech or slander aimed against men or God. It is slander against men; blasphemy against God.

(11) Pride defiles a person (verse 22). It is the attitude which has contempt for everyone except oneself. It can be hidden in the heart and never be manifest publicly. The Bible warns that God opposes the proud (James 4:6).

(12) Foolishness defiles a person (verse 22). That is not a reference to a weakness of intellect, but to moral folly. It is not the man who is a brainless fool, but the man who chooses to play the fool.

Jesus concludes the list with these words: "*All these evil things come from within, and defile the man*" (verse 23).

Now let us return to our starting point. Man says defilement comes through the things one puts on or within his body. God says defilement comes through evil attitudes which produce evil actions springing from the heart. Which principle must we live by? Shall it be God's way or man's?

1. How would you summarize this lesson truth in one sentence?
2. How does I Samuel 16:7 relate to the study?
3. How can we distinguish between tradition and Bible doctrine?
4. What is the danger in following tradition?
5. How did the Jewish tradition violate Exodus 20:12?

6. What does Romans 14:14 really mean?
7. How would you interpret Mark 7:15?
8. What things defile a person?
9. How can you keep free from such defilement?
10. How can you make sure you stay pure before God?