

TRADITION VS SCRIPTURE

Mark 7:1-23

In order to understand this passage we need first to understand a thing called the Oral Law (also referred to as *the tradition of the elders*). The Oral Law was a commentary on the Written Law (the Law of Moses) explaining how its 613 commandments were to be carried out. Certain Jews believe that at the same time that the Written Law was given from Mount Sinai, the Oral Law, too, was delivered to Moses. The Oral Law was then handed down orally to certain Jewish leaders/rabbis through each successive generation until these teaching were collected in a book called the *Mishnah*. The Mishnah is a compilation of the teachings of these Jewish leaders/rabbis to whom the Oral Law was committed tracing clear back to Moses.

The teachings of these Jewish rabbis was in the process of being collected in the days of our Lord. The Mishnah was completed about 250 A.D.; over 200 years after Jesus' ascension. The Mishnah is the tradition of the elders in written form. For orthodox Jews the Mishnah is their second most important book; the Torah (Written Law) being the first.

In the minds of some Jews, the authority of the tradition of the elders, the Oral Law, is equal to or, in some cases, exceeds that of the Written Law. From the introduction to the Mishnah we have this explanation.

The Mishnah, in other words, maintains that the authority of those rules, customs, and interpretations which had accumulated around the Jewish system of life and religion was equal to the authority of the Written Law itself, even though they found no place in the Written Law. ...Inevitably the inference follows that the living tradition (the Oral Law) is more important than the Written Law, since the "tradition of the elders", besides claiming an authority and continuity equal to that of the Written Law, claims also to be its authentic and living interpretation and its essential complement.¹

This is what the Pharisees and scribes believed who confronted Jesus when they saw His disciples failing to follow the *tradition of the elders*.

"TO WASH OR NOT TO WASH" (7:1-13)

Why didn't Jesus' disciples wash according to the tradition of the elders? (7:1-5)

Mark 7:1-5 (ESV)

¹ Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, ² they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, ⁴ and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions

¹ Danby, Herbert, *The Mishnah*, (New York: Oxford Press), 1933, p. xvii.

that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)⁵ And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

It is important we understand that the disciples were not accused of violating the Law of Moses; they were accused of not keeping the tradition of the elders.

Actually, the only hand washing required under the Law of Moses was for the priests. The priests were required to wash their hands and their feet before entering the Tabernacle and before offering sacrifices on the altar (Ex. 30:18–21; 40:30–32). But somewhere along the way the teaching developed that not only the priests but the general population must ceremonially wash after shopping and before eating.

The Pharisees and scribes were critical of Jesus because in their minds He and His disciples were sinning against God by not keeping the tradition of the elders.

In His rebuttal Jesus makes clear that the only authority is the revealed Word of God; the traditions of men have no authority.

The tradition of the elders have no authority, only Scripture (7:6-13)

Mark 7:6–13 (ESV)

⁶ And he 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 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’²

⁸ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.”

The pharisees and scribes were guilty of elevating the status of the tradition of the elders to that of Scripture. They were hypocrites primarily in the sense that by holding to the tradition of men they appeared to be upholding the Law of Moses, but in fact, they violated it. Jesus backed up His criticism with a specific case in point – vow keeping.

⁹ And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban” ’ (that is, given to God)— ¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.”

Corban was something dedicated or given to God. Jewish law allowed individuals to dedicate their service or property to God. Hannah dedicated Samuel to God (1 Samuel 1:11). Samuel was *Corban*; he was a gift dedicated to God.

Jesus was not critical of the practice of *Corban*. He was critical of this particular case of *Corban* allowed under the tradition of the elders.

² Isaiah 29:13 from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament).

Jesus quoted the fifth commandment:

Exodus 20:12 (ESV)

¹² “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

And He quoted Exodus 21:17:

Exodus 21:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

According to the tradition of the elders, a son could declare his property *Corban* and skirt his duty to care for his parents; a clear violation of the fifth commandment, but nonetheless allowed by tradition. And once having made the vow, even if the son wanted to repent, the tradition of the elders would not allow it; he was required to keep his vow so as not to violate the law of vow keeping (Numbers 30:1-2).

Because the scribes and Pharisees venerated the tradition of the elders they were either unable or unwilling to think critically about the traditions. In this case, the tradition of the elders concerning this particular vow was wrong. The vow was a blatant violation of the Written Law to honor one’s parents. And yet, because it was a “tradition of the elders” the scribes and pharisees seemed incapable of recognizing the inappropriateness of the vow itself. Blindly adhering to the tradition of the elders, the pharisees’ violated God’s Word and taught others to do the same.

The Written Law, revealed by God, is the authority. The Oral Law, the tradition of the elders which is simply the tradition of men, is not authoritative. That is why Jesus’ disciples did not ceremonially wash before eating.

This represented a massive rift between Jesus and the Jewish leadership.

In the church, we need to always remember and practice - Scripture trumps tradition.

Keying off the issue of ritual purity; Jesus addressed the real cause of man’s alienation from God.

IT’S THE HEART, NOT THE HAM (7:14-23)

Jesus told a parable to the crowd (7:14-16)

Mark 7:14–16 (ESV)

¹⁴ And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.”

This may not be a difficult truth for us to grasp. But this is what the people were being taught by their spiritual leaders.

Even the disciples were perplexed.

Jesus explained the parable to His disciples (7:17-23)

Mark 7:17–23 (ESV)

¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding?”

Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

It is very much a human tendency to focus on external rituals and rules rather than the real problem – our hearts.

It is the evil thoughts and attitudes that are in the human heart that give rise to all manner of evil deeds. Our character alienates us from God. Washing hands and eating kosher can't change a person's heart.

I want to share with you a number of thoughts from the book *Renovation of the Heart* by Dallas Willard. I encourage you to discuss these out in your Home Fellowship this week.

*...the greatest need you and I have - the greatest need of collective humanity - is renovation of our heart. That spiritual place within us from which outlook, choices, and actions come has been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed.*³

This transformation of heart is the only hope for true peace in our world. Political correctness and hate crime laws are attempts to deal with the human heart from the outside. They may curb some behavior, but they cannot transform the source of hatred, prejudice and violence.

*The revolution of Jesus is in the first place and continuously a revolution of the human heart or spirit. It did not and does not proceed by means of the formation of social institutions and laws, the outer forms of our existence, intending that these would then impose a good order of life upon people who come under their power. Rather, his is a revolution of character, which proceeds by changing people from the inside through ongoing personal relationship to God in Christ and to one another. It is one that changes their ideas, beliefs, feelings, and habits of choice, as well as their bodily tendencies and social relations. It penetrates to the deepest layers of their soul.*⁴

How does this transformation of the human heart take place? The starting point is to be reconciled to God. That is possible because Jesus paid our sin debt in full and removed it as a barrier between us and the Father. All who put their confidence in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins are forgiven and indwelt by the God the Holy Spirit. This is the starting point for transformation.

2 Peter 1:3-11 is a passage that sets out the process of transformation.

³ Dallas Willard. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ* (Kindle Locations 82-83). Kindle Edition.

⁴ *Renovation of the Heart*, (Kindle Locations 95-98).

2 Peter 1:3-11 (ESV)

³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I included in the notes Willard's comments on 2 Peter 1:3-11. I encourage you to study this and to discuss this in depth in your Home Fellowship.

Praise God that Jesus has the power to transform our hearts!

DALLAS WILLARD ON 2 PETER 1:3-11

Here, starting from the bedrock of "God's divine power, that has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness" - stop now and think about how much "everything" leaves out - the writer proceeds to point to the "precious and magnificent promises" of God that make it possible for us to "become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through excessive desire or lust" (verses 3-4, PAR).

*And how is this escape to come about? By putting forth your very best efforts - "applying all diligence," a good translation says - to add to your faith, your confidence in Christ, moral excellence or **virtue**. That is, train yourself to simply do what is good and right. Obviously, this is something we are to do, which will not be done for us.*

*And then, in your virtue, add on **knowledge** or understanding. That is, come to know why the good and right you do is good and right. Operate from insight into the realities of it all.*

*And then, in your insight, add on **self-control**. That is, develop the capacity to carry out your intentions and not be thrown off by any turn of events.*

*And then, in your self-control, add on **perseverance** (endurance, patience). This is the capacity to stick with the course, to stay with it over the long haul, regardless of how you may feel.*

*And then, in your perseverance add on **godliness**. Perhaps we can best think of this as depth and thoroughness of all the preceding attainments of grace. God is characterized by his inexhaustible resources of goodness.*

*And then, in your godliness add on the **kindness** and **gentleness** of care which one sees among siblings and true friends. The word here is "philadelphia." That is, extend family feeling and action to those in your community. Just think of what that would mean to this wounded world. But it is possible to do this superhuman thing only through the goodness and strength of godliness.*

*And then, in your brotherly kindness add on **agape love**. This is the kind of love that characterizes God himself, and is spelled out in heart-rending detail on the cross of Jesus and in 1 Corinthians 13. It goes far beyond philadelphia and into the very heart of God. We are not just to love as family, but as he loved us (John 13:34). Agape love is always presented, in the biblical descriptions of the children of light, as the ultimate move, which completes and solidifies all of the other gains in spiritual progression (see Romans 5:5; 1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:14; Ephesians 4:15-16; Colossians 3:14; 1 John 4:16; and so on).*

Peter concludes his great progression by telling us that, if we do what he here says, we will "never stumble" and that "entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you" (2 Peter 1:10-11, emphasis added).⁵

LET'S THINK ABOUT IT...

- ? Can we put into action the plan for spiritual transformation stated by Peter (2 Peter 1:3-11)? Why or why not?
- ? How would we practically go about adding self-control to our knowledge (or any of Peter's other "add-to's")?

⁵ Renovation of the Heart: (Kindle Locations 3155-3171).