

Tradition Versus Scripture

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Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0 : 00] Mark chapter 7. We'll look at Mark chapter 7, verses 1 through 13 tonight.

Let's go ahead and read those verses. Here are Mark chapter 7, verses 1 through 13. Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, that's Jesus, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.

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? 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. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.

[1 : 18] You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. And he said to them, You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.

For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, If a man tells his father or mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is korban, that is, given to God, Then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, Thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down, And many such things you do.

Here's the main idea for this passage. Jesus condemns the legalism of valuing tradition above scripture. Once again, Jesus condemns the legalism of valuing tradition above scripture.

These verses are part of a broader section that runs through Mark chapter 7, verse 23. Tonight and next week, we'll see Jesus take on the burdensome system of Jewish tradition that had turned into legalism.

R.C. Sproul provided some useful definitions of legalism. He said, Perhaps the most basic type of legalism is also the most devastating. It's the belief that we can be justified in the sight of God by obedience to the law.

[2 : 43] This dependence on our good works is totally opposed to the way of salvation that God declares so plainly in scripture. Justification by faith alone in Christ alone, who provides the only righteousness that can possibly have value for us.

If we are trusting in any other righteousness than the righteousness of Jesus, we are caught in the snare of legalism. He goes on to say, Another type of legalism is the one Jesus exposes in the Pharisees and scribes in the opening verses of Mark chapter 7.

That's the elevation of traditions of men to the point where they are allowed to bind the consciences of God's people where God has left them free. This type involves adding to the law of God's commandments and prohibitions that God has not spoken.

Sproul called a third kind of legalism loophole-ism. He said loophole-ism happens when people try to discern ways to get around the law of God.

And we'll see loophole-ism tonight as well. By the time Jesus came to the earth, Jewish religious leaders had developed hundreds of traditions that were never prescribed in the Bible.

[3 : 55] These traditions consisted of extra-biblical regulations that had been passed down from the time of the Babylonian captivity. These oral traditions, which pervaded the Judaism of Jesus' day, were eventually written down in the Mishnah around the end of the 2nd century A.D.

This Mishnah, along with additional rabbinic commentary called the Gemara, makes up the Talmud, which is the collection of Jewish tradition that in printed form encompasses thousands of pages of extra-biblical material.

The religious leaders who initially developed these rules and regulations had good intentions. They wanted to keep Jews from violating the actual laws that God had given to Moses in the Torah, which we know as the first five books of the Old Testament.

These leaders thought that by prescribing more restrictive rules and regulations, they could prevent people from violating God's actual law. The Jews called this tradition the fence of the law.

In reality, these additional rules undermined and obscured the law that they were intended to protect. Over time, the Jewish people began to measure their spiritual condition in terms of external conformity to traditional requirements and ceremonial rituals, rather than in terms of sincere love for God and humble obedience to the Word.

[5 : 18] The Jewish leaders came to honor their traditions far above the Word of God. One rabbi, Rabbi Eliezer, said, He who expounds the Scriptures in opposition to the tradition has no share in the world to come.

And the Mishnah actually records, It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself. So be sure to hear that incorrect teaching of the Mishnah.

Again, the Mishnah says, It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself. We'll have a hard time finding a more legalistic statement than that one.

But we'll miss a primary application of the text if we simply use the passage to criticize our Jewish friends or our Roman Catholic friends for their legalistic style of worship. This passage should cause us to reexamine how we as Christians view things.

We can be just as legalistic as the Jews and Roman Catholics. We can wrongly think that true worshipers of God must dress a certain way or act a certain way. And we can wrongly think that one style of music is better than another or that we must have a particular order of service.

[6 : 36] Amazingly, we can have a passion for God but not know God. We can be deceived, captured, and enslaved by the deadly lure of legalism.

Tragically, those who have been raised in the church are the most susceptible to this type of deception. Our pride in our religious rituals, church practices, and cultural traditions blind us to both our great sinfulness and our great Savior who alone can rescue us from our sin.

As we look at the passage tonight, think about our church specifically. Ask yourself these questions. If someone unfamiliar with the Bible visits one of our Sunday or Wednesday services, do we clearly explain that every person is a sinner who needs to be made right with God or face eternal consequences and eternal condemnation?

Do we clearly explain how the Bible says that sinners can be made right with God? Do we avoid adding anything to those biblical requirements? So, in other words, do we consistently, clearly, and correctly share the gospel?

If we fail to consistently, clearly, and correctly share the gospel, we are just as bad as the religious leaders that Jesus confronts in these verses that we'll look at tonight.

[7 : 56] We just finished Mark chapter 6, and the events described in that chapter, from the commissioning of the twelve to the feeding of the thousands to Jesus walking on the water, represent both the peak of Jesus' popularity and the climax of his Galilean ministry.

The people he miraculously fed were so amazed that they wanted to come and take him by force to make him king, that their motivation was merely national and materialistic.

The following day, when Jesus articulated spiritual realities regarding the kingdom, the crowd quickly became disenchanted. Many of his followers left him, and his popularity began to decline. And from that point forward, Jesus focused more and more of his attention on training the twelve, preparing them for their ministry to begin after his crucifixion and resurrection.

We'll see that now as we move into Mark chapter 7. The broader opening section of chapter 7 that runs through verse 23 returns to the theme of conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders.

[9 : 06] Remember, we saw that back in Mark chapter 2 all the way to Mark chapter 3, verse 6. It emphasizes the rejection that Jesus encountered in Israel despite his public popularity, and it serves as a prelude for his ministry to the Gentiles.

You'll notice that the words defile and tradition bind the broader section together. We'll break tonight's passage into three sections, starting with verses 1 through 5. Mark chapter 7, verses 1 through 5 show us the sanctimonious exasperation. So the sanctimonious exasperation is your first set of blanks. Let's read just verses 1 through 4 first. Now when the Pharisees gathered to him with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash.

[10:14] And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches. We said this is about the sanctimonious exasperation of the scribes.

And if you look up the definition of sanctimonious, Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines sanctimonious as hypocritically pious or devout. So you can see that that fits here.

They definitely were hypocritically pious or devout, and Jesus will call them out on that. Mark tells us that some of them had come from Jerusalem. That would have required a one-way journey of about 100 miles, likely on foot.

So that gives you an idea of just how much the religious leaders wanted to catch Jesus doing something wrong. Verse 2 tells us that the religious leaders saw Jesus' disciples eating with unwashed or defiled hands.

Washing our hands before meals is good hygiene, and we should do that. However, the washing described here has nothing to do with hygiene. The washing described here is a ceremonial washing.

[11:28] Mosaic law prescribed ceremonial washings for priests, but it did not require others to wash their hands in any particular way before eating. The Pharisees insisted that the Jewish people perform specific ceremonial washings not because they were biblically commanded, but because they were part of rabbinical teaching.

The religious leaders were hardly concerned about sanitation, but obsessed with ritual tradition. This ceremonial washing could be quite a process, particularly if a Jew had just returned from the marketplace.

The ceremonial washing prescribed by rabbinical teaching involved several steps. First, water was poured from a jar onto both hands with the fingers pointing up so that the water would run off at the wrist.

Then water was again poured over the hands with the fingers pointing down. Finally, each hand was rubbed with the fist of the other hand. Strict Jews would follow these regulations before every meal and between each course in the meal.

You can see just how involved these practices got. The washings became even more elaborate when people returned home after going out because they feared they might have been defiled through contact with a Samaritan, a Gentile, or even a fellow Jew who was ceremonially unclean.

[12:57] Mark tells us that when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And added to this traditional hand washing was the careful cleansing of cooking instruments and dining utensils.

Mark then says there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches. Together, these ritualistic washings made each mealtime an elaborate and meticulous affair.

These washings indicated a wrong attitude toward people, and they also conveyed a wrong attitude of the nature of sin and personal holiness. Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that true holiness is a matter of inward affection and attitude and not just outward actions and associations.

The pious Pharisees thought they were holy because they avoided external defilement. Jesus taught that a person who obeys the law externally can still break the law in his heart.

External defilement has little connection with the condition of the inner person. Listen to this quote from Warren Wearsby.

[14:11] The conflict was between God's truth and man's tradition and between two divergent views of sin and holiness. This confrontation was no incidental skirmish.

It got to the very heart of true religious faith. Each new generation must engage in a similar conflict. Human nature is prone to hold on to worn-out man-made traditions and ignore or disobey the living word of God.

Some traditions are helpful as reminders of our rich heritage or as cement to bind generations, but we must constantly beware lest tradition take the place of truth. It does us good to examine our church traditions in the light of God's word and to be courageous enough to make changes. Before we move on, consider why the religious leaders were so aghast at what they saw Jesus' disciples doing. The religious leaders were upset that the disciples openly ignored rabbinic teaching.

Jesus had already violated their Sabbath traditions, so the Jews were eager to accuse him when they saw the disciples eat with hands that were defiled. These leaders resented it when our Lord openly flaunted their authority.

[15:27] These practices had been handed down for generations, and the leaders thought that they carried with them the authority of the ages. In verse 5, the religious leaders no longer can hold in their displeasure, so they asked Jesus a question.

Their inquiry was not motivated by curiosity, but by outrage. They were incensed that Jesus would allow his disciples to openly disregard a ritual that they considered so binding.

Here is verse 5 again. 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?

Notice something that is very important about the question. Jesus was careful to teach his disciples to follow the Mosaic Law, and Jesus always followed the Mosaic Law himself.

Mosaic Law is Scripture. And for proof of that, listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 5, verses 17 and 18, part of the Sermon on the Mount. Here are Matthew 5, verses 17 and 18.

[16:44] Jesus said, Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

But a major difference exists between violating Scripture and ignoring useless tradition. When we see Jesus respond to the question in the next section of the passage, Jesus will tell the sanctimonious religious leaders just how useless their tradition is.

The second section of the passage records the start of Jesus' response to the question. In Mark 7, verses 6-8, we see the Savior's evaluation.

So the Savior's evaluation is what comes next. Speaking about Jesus, Mark 7, verses 6-8 tell us, Jesus holds nothing back in his answer here.

We hardly can imagine a more blunt beginning to an answer than, Well, did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites? A hypocrite originally was a Greek actor who wore a mask that portrayed, in an exaggerated way, the role that was being dramatized.

[18:27] For obvious reasons, the term came to be used of anyone who pretended to be what he was not. So Jesus called these religious leaders a group of phony pretenders.

Then Jesus used Scripture to back up this statement. The Scripture quoted in Mark 7, verses 6-7 is Isaiah 29, verse 13.

Isaiah prophesied about future blessing on the people of Israel while also prophesying about condemnation on the supposed wise leaders who led the people astray by teaching them to comply with tradition instead of Scripture.

Here are Isaiah 29, verses 13 and 14. So you can see here that God says he's going to hold the religious leaders accountable for what they're teaching the people.

God's marvelous work includes both judgment on the proud and salvation for the lowly. Back in our passage in Mark, the religious leaders' actions and Jesus' actions are fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 29, verses 13 and 14.

[19:58] Notice in his answer that Jesus made no reference to his disciples' conduct. Instead, he addressed the true source of religious authority.

Are you going to rely on tradition or are you going to rely on Scripture? Here's another quote from Warren Wearsby. He said, Then he goes on to say, Notice the tragic sequence.

Teaching their doctrines as God's Word, laying aside God's Word, then rejecting God's Word, and then finally robbing God's Word of its power. People who revere man-made traditions above the Word of God eventually lose the power of God's Word in their lives.

No matter how devout they may appear, their hearts are far from God. These religious fakes were outraged that Jesus disregarded their traditions, but the Lord knew that neither he nor his disciples were bound to follow rabbinic customs.

Only that which came from Scripture was authoritative. Where tradition conflicted with the Word of God, tradition needed to be overturned and its purveyors openly exposed.

[21 : 47] The Pharisees and scribes accused Jesus' disciples of committing a serious offense. In reality, it was the Pharisees and scribes who were guilty of the real crimes against God.

The Pharisees and scribes neglected the commandment of God and influenced many others to do the same. Their hands may have been washed and cleansed, but their hearts were not.

Consequently, they and their followers were headed for eternal judgment. In Mark 6, verse 8, Jesus repeats his indictment of the scribes and Pharisees.

Jesus said, You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. Jesus redefined their oral tradition, emphasizing its human origin.

Then he straightforwardly rejected its authority. Here's another quote from R.C. Sproul. He said, The temptation to add to God's law is not unique to the Pharisees.

[22 : 49] We have to deal with it every day in the Christian life. That is why when people say, You ought to do this, but you ought not to do that, our best course is to take the word of God, search the scriptures, and say, Oh God, I want to please you, not according to the traditions of men, but according to your law.

Before we leave this section, consider something else about Jesus' response. In our study through the first six chapters of Mark's gospel, we've seen numerous examples of Jesus proving that he is God.

As God, Jesus simply could have answered the religious leaders' question out of his own authority. But Jesus knows that the religious leaders refuse to believe that he is God.

Rather than using his own authority, Jesus answers the scribes and Pharisees' question using scripture that those religious leaders claim to affirm. By responding to the scribes and the Pharisees that way, Jesus put even more emphasis on the importance of scripture.

So we see that Jesus practiced what he preached. So far, we've seen the sanctimonious exasperation and the Savior's evaluation.

[24 : 05] In Mark chapter 7, verses 9 through 13, we see the sad equivocation. So the sad equivocation is what comes next. Going back again to our friends at the Merriam-Webster Collegian Dictionary, it says that words are equivocal if they are subject to two or more interpretations and usually meant to mislead or confuse.

And that certainly is what the last section of tonight's scripture shows us about some of those religious leaders' rules. To prove his point that the religious leaders hypocritically value human tradition more than God's commandments, Jesus gives the Pharisees and scribes a specific example.

Jesus shows how they use tradition to nullify God's commandment to honor parents. Listen to verses 9 through 13 of Mark chapter 7 again. This, of course, is Jesus, and it says, And he said to them, You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition. For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, If a man tells his father or mother, Whatever you would have gained from me is korban, that is, given to God, then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do. The Israelites first received that commandment to honor parents in Exodus chapter 20, verse 12.

[25 : 46] And here is Exodus chapter 20, verse 12. It says, Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy chapter 5, verse 16 restates that commandment. And here is Deuteronomy chapter 5, verse 16. Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. Under the Mosaic law, Exodus 21, verse 15, Exodus 21, verse 17, and Leviticus 20, verse 9, specify death for serious violations of this commandment.

Here is Leviticus chapter 20, verse 9. Leviticus 20, verse 9 says, For anyone who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.

He has cursed his father or his mother. His blood is upon him. Going back to our Mark text, look closely at Jesus' words that begin verse 10, and also his words that begin verse 11.

[27 : 00] In Mark 7, 10, Jesus stated, For Moses said, and in verse 11, Jesus stated, But you say. By starting his comments in verse 10 with the reference to Moses, Jesus is citing the scripture that Moses wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Then when Jesus says, But you say. He's referencing the traditions of the religious leaders. So the Pharisees had indeed created a theological loophole.

They simply declared what they would have given to their parents as korban, and that's a Hebrew term referring to a gift dedicated to God. This allowed them to dishonor their parents by neglecting their parents' needs, but they could still feel good about it because in their minds, that deed was done in service to God.

In effect, those who claimed that something was korban were saying, I served God by disobeying his express command to honor my parents. So you can see the absurdity of that logic.

What kind of logic is that? Be sure to catch the irony here. The tradition of the elders added commands to the law of God in an attempt to put a fence around it to make sure people couldn't get near breaking it.

[28 : 16] But in the end, those traditions are what caused people to break the law. Jesus says that they are leaving the commandment of God, rejecting it, and making it void.

So of course that is the true definition of hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is bad enough, but it gets worse. Strangely, the regulations for korban permitted a person to use wealth that had been committed to God for himself during his lifetime.

He just couldn't use it for anybody else. So this tradition sought to sanctify a way for a person to get out from under the responsibility that God put on his people to honor their parents.

In the name of piety, a person could escape the obligation of caring for his parents in times of illness or in their old age when they might be too frail to support themselves. He could simply say to his parents, I am very sorry.

I would like to help you, but my wealth is korban. Everything I have is committed to the Lord, and I cannot give the Lord's money to you. But we need to balance out that provision with another fact.

[29 : 26] R.C. Sproul noted this. He said, Among all the ethnic groups in the world, there will maybe none that does more for the care of its age members than the Jewish community.

Despite all of this rabbinic nonsense, the law that God gave through Moses in the Old Testament has been honored even to this day as families care for their own without depending on other institutions such as the government.

But no ethnic group is perfect, of course. Thus, even among the Jews, there were those who tried to use this rabbinic tradition to avoid their responsibility. In the last sentence of Mark 7, verse 13, Jesus emphasizes that the korban example is just one of several cases where the religious leaders were teaching the people to value tradition above God's commandments.

The end of verse 13 is where Jesus added, And many such things you do. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were systematically minimizing the impact of the word of God on the lives and the hearts of the people of Israel.

Remember the main idea. Jesus condemns the legalism of valuing tradition above scripture. John MacArthur noted, Hypocrisy is not limited to ancient Judaism.

[30 : 51] It is still pervasive in various forms of Christendom today where it thrives in empty ceremonies, superficial worship, errant doctrines, indifferent prayers, legalistic moralism, and the like.

By its very definition, hypocrisy looks good on the outside, but it is corrupt on the inside. Hypocrisy related to the worship of God is a sin that is more common among professing believers than among unbelievers.

After all, most unbelievers make no pretense of worshiping God. The solution for hypocrisy, though, is the same as for any other sin, and that is repentance.

Perhaps no New Testament example better illustrates that truth than the Apostle Paul. As a Pharisee, Paul measured his spiritual condition in terms of self-righteous external rituals and religious accolades.

When he became a Christian, he realized that those things were worthless. Listen to the familiar words of Paul in Philippians 3, verses 2-11.

[32 : 00] Again, these verses are Philippians 3, verses 2-11. Paul said, Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.

For we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also.

If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

[33 : 34] As he often does, J.C. Ryle neatly summarized the message of our passage tonight. Here's what Ryle said. He said, Let us beware of attempting to add anything to the word of God as necessary to salvation.

It provokes God to give us over to judicial blindness. It is as good as saying that his Bible is not perfect and that we know better than he does what is necessary for our salvation.

It is just as easy to destroy the authority of God's word by addition as by subtraction, by bearing 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. Then he continued, let us draw a line of distinction between those things in religion which have been devised by mankind and those which have been commanded in God's word. What God commands is necessary to salvation. What mankind commands is not. What mankind devises may be useful and expedient for the times, but salvation does not hinge on obedience to mankind.

[34 : 48] What God requires is essential to life eternal. Those who willfully disobey it, that's what God requires, ruin their own soul. Speaking specifically to believers, Daniel Akin said, can you provide a scriptural basis for what you believe and do?

Are you a text-driven or a tradition-driven Christian? The difference is crucial. In the introduction to the lesson, we mentioned some questions to consider about Highland Park.

And here are those questions again. If someone unfamiliar with the Bible visits one of our Sunday or Wednesday services, do we clearly explain that every person is a sinner who needs to be made right with God or face eternal condemnation?

Do we clearly explain how the Bible says that sinners can be made right with God? Do we avoid adding anything to those biblical requirements? Or said another way, do we consistently, clearly, and correctly share the gospel?

I encourage you to think about that and if you find some things that we do that don't line up with Scripture, come to one of the elders and let us know. We want to make sure that everything we do always is in line with Scripture.

[36 : 10] After all, J.C. Ryle's quote reminded us that what God commands is necessary for salvation and what man commands is unnecessary for salvation. So what is the gospel that we should clearly proclaim?

Well, Romans 3.23 tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And then Romans 6.23 reminds us, for the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We always need to remember that God sent His Son Jesus to earth, Jesus lived the perfect life that none of us could live, and Jesus paid the penalty for all believers' sins when He died on the cross.

God demonstrated that He accepted Jesus' sacrifice by resurrecting Jesus on the third day.

Everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ alone for salvation will be saved.

Romans 10.9 underscores this fact. And here is Romans 10.9 Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

[37 : 23] That is the good news. And that is the gospel. And we saw the commandment of God related to the gospel early in our study of Mark. Listen to what Jesus, God Himself, said in Mark 1.15.

In Mark 1.15, Jesus said, The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.

Let's pray. Father, this is a difficult passage to study. It's not near as interesting as some of the miracles that we've studied recently.

But it's important for us to always judge what we do in light of what your scripture says we should be doing. If we are doing some things that we shouldn't or if we're not doing some things that we should, please reveal those things to us so that we can correct those and so that we can correctly proclaim your gospel to anyone who comes to our services.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.