

23. Jesus Taught About the Traditions of Man

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to explain to others how to come to Christ and receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In this topic, we will see that some of the Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem to find fault with Jesus. They accused the disciples of Jesus, because the disciples were not following the traditions of the elders.

Mark 7:1-4 says, “Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash *their* hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. *When they come* from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, *like* the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.” Jesus was in Galilee. This meant that these Pharisees and scribes had traveled about seventy-five or eighty miles in order to find some fault in Jesus. Here, we see that their goal was to find something of which to accuse Jesus.

In their efforts to find some reason to accuse Jesus, these Pharisees and scribes noticed that the disciples of Jesus had broken what was called “the tradition of the elders”. After the captivity of Judah by Babylon, the Jews started adding their own interpretations to the law. These were not even written down at the time of the New Testament. These traditions were put into writing, about one hundred and fifty years after Christ, and were called the Mishna. These oral traditions had become more important to the scribes and Pharisees than the Old Testament law. These were what they accused the disciples of breaking.

The only commandment of Moses about the washing of hands was in Leviticus 22:4-7, where we read, “Whatever man of the descendants of Aaron, who is a leper or has a discharge, shall not eat the holy offerings until he is clean. And whoever touches anything made unclean *by* a corpse, or a man who has had an emission of semen, or whoever touches any creeping thing by which he would be made unclean, or any person by whom he would become unclean, whatever his uncleanness may be— the person who has touched any such thing shall be unclean until evening, and shall not eat the holy *offerings* unless he washes his body with water. And when the sun goes down he shall be clean; and afterward he may eat the holy *offerings*, because it is his food.” Here, we see that the only washing, that was required of the priests, was before they ate the meat of an animal offered as a sacrifice. As a result, the Pharisees could only accuse the disciples of breaking their traditions, which were not from the Scriptures.

When the Jews came from the marketplace, they said this ceremony of washing had to be done before a person ate any food. Someone had to pour water over the hands while the person held his hands with the fingers pointing toward heaven. The water had to drip off of the wrist. Once the water dripped off the wrist, more water had to be poured over the hands with the fingers pointing down. Finally, each hand had to be rubbed with the other fist. In addition to this tradition, we see that the scribes also had many other traditions about the proper way to wash cups, pitchers, copper containers and even couches. These traditions were more important to the scribes than the Law of

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Moses.

Mark 7:5-8 says, “Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?’ He answered and 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. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.’” We see that the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem asked Jesus why His disciples did not walk according to the tradition of the elders. They said that the disciples were eating bread with unwashed hands.

Instead of answering their question, Jesus answered them by pointing out that they were hypocrites. The word translated “hypocrite” means *a stage player or a pretender*, because in that day, one person would play many different parts in a play and would hold a different mask for each person they played. Jesus used this word to speak of those who were spiritual phonies and did not have true belief in their hearts. Then, Jesus quoted the words of the Greek translation of Isaiah 29:13. That verse says, “Therefore the Lord said: ‘Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men.’” Isaiah said people would talk about God but have hearts filled with unbelief.

This verse described exactly what the Pharisees were doing. They spoke words from their lips that claimed to honor God. However, their hearts were filled with evil. Jesus later explained this to His disciples, when He said, in Mark 7:20-23, ““What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”” Jesus said that when the heart of a person is filled with evil, the evil in his heart is what defiles him, not a failure to wash the hands.

Jesus also pointed out that the worship of the Pharisees and scribes was “vain” which means *worthless or fruitless*. That was due to the fact that the traditions they were teaching were the commandments of men, instead of the commandments of God. Jesus said that they had laid aside the commandments of God. Instead, they were teaching the traditions of men as if they were commandments, even when they were about things like washing pitchers or cups. 2 Timothy 3:1-5 warns us that we will have similar teachers in the last days. Those verses say, “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!” Often the goal of such teachers is described in 1 Timothy 6:9-10, where we read, “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all *kinds* of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” These verses also described the

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goal of the scribes and Pharisees.

Mark 7:9-13 says, “He said to them, ‘*All too* well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, “He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.” But you say, “If a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me *is Corban*’—” (that is, a gift *to God*), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.’” Jesus then pointed out that the Pharisees and scribes specifically violated one of the Ten Commandments through their traditions. This was due to the fact that they were rejecting the Word of God.

Exodus 20:12 says, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you.” This is the fifth commandment and the first of those that speak about our relationship to other people. Then, Exodus 21:17 adds, “And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.” Here, God showed that the penalty for the disrespect of parents was death. However, the Pharisees and scribes had a tradition that allowed them to disrespect their parent by not helping their parents when their parents were in need.

One tradition of the Pharisees and scribes was to avoid helping their parents in times of need by saying Corban. The word “Corban” means *given to God or this is a gift to God*. As a result, when parents were in need of money for food or other necessary things, the Pharisees and scribes would say Corban. Then, these men would tell their parents that they could not help them out in their time of need, because they had dedicated their money and possessions to God. In this way, the Pharisees kept all of their money for themselves and did nothing to help their parents. In fact, they even taught that it would be sinful to help their parents since that money had been dedicated to God. Here, we see that their evil hearts drove them to keep their riches, instead of respecting their parents.

In contrast, Jesus said that they were actually making the Word of God of no effect by their traditions. The word translated “of no effect” means *to make something useless or void and without any authority*. Jesus then went on to say that the Pharisees and scribes had many similar traditions. That is why Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 to show that these religious leaders had a heart that was far from God, even though they made it sound, by their words, that they were honoring God. That is also why Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?”

We want to help our physical and spiritual children clearly understand that there can be religious leaders just like the Pharisees and scribes. Such individuals have replaced the Word of God with their own opinions, because their hearts are far from God. We want to help our children learn to recognize and avoid such false teachers. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children understand the hearts of false religious teachers.