

Trad Life

Mark 7:1-23 November 12, 2025

We're officially in *tradition* season. At Thanksgiving and Christmas, our national and personal traditions make our celebrations what they are. Think for a moment of the one thing you wouldn't be willing to give up. Whether it's a certain activity or special food, there's *something* you do every year that - if it didn't happen - the holiday wouldn't feel right.

And that's absolutely fine. Those annual customs can enrich our appreciation of *why* we celebrate. Certain traditions can help us understand and savor more fully.

Traditionalism can be good for Christmas, but it is *terrible* for our communion with *Christ*. That's what this text is about. The scribes and Pharisees accost Jesus, saying He does not properly honor the traditions of the Jewish elders and, therefore, is not qualified before God.

Jesus takes the opportunity to not merely defend His disciples, but to reveal that *He* was instituting a whole new arrangement through which people can be right with God.

Yet again we're seeing a pivotal moment in spiritual history. In this text, Jesus not only puts Himself *above* the traditional Jewish interpretations of the Torah, He will, in fact, declare that He is *above* the Torah - not just able to interpret it, but *concluding* many aspects of it as He introduces a *new* covenant between God and man.

Mark 7:1-4 - ¹ The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him. ² They observed that some of his disciples were eating bread with unclean—that is, unwashed—hands. ³ (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, keeping the tradition of the elders. ⁴ When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they have washed. And there are many other customs they have received and keep, like the washing of cups, pitchers, kettles, and dining couches.,)

The scribes and Pharisees were very aggressive in their desire to find fault with Jesus' teachings and behavior. Some of these guys travelled more than 100 miles from Jerusalem.¹ Look how they *surround* Him. When's the last time *you* were surrounded by an official group of people accusing you of unlawful activity?

Their complaint was not about hygiene. It was that the disciples didn't do a specific ritual washing before eating. Some think it was a washing up to the elbows, like surgeons do before operating. Or where they would pour water over a closed fist and use that to wash the other hand.²

¹ Ralph Earle *Mark: The Gospel Of Action*

² James Brooks *The New American Commentary, Vol. 23: Mark*

Now, this was *not* part of the Law of Moses. There were some specific rules about times when *priests* had to do ceremonial washing, but not everyone else. But, through the centuries, the rabbis and leaders of Israel had created these oral traditions *around* the Law and said they were just as important as the Law itself. And this mass of traditions kept mushrooming more and more to the point that the Mishnah, which was published later, has *thirty chapters* just on washing vessels.³

And let's realize at *this* point in time, all these rules were *still* in their oral form. They weren't even written down yet. How could *anyone* actually keep up with all these regulations that the scribes and Pharisees said were *essential* and that they *demand*ed?

Paul would later point out all these traditional rules were a heavy yoke put on believers' necks that "neither our ancestors *nor* we were able to bear."⁴ And remember - he was a Pharisee of Pharisees!

Mark 7:5 - ⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating bread with ceremonially unclean hands?"

This special washing was *only* formally required before the consumption of bread.⁵ That, by itself, should reveal how arbitrary their complaint was. But the much larger red flag is where they say, "Why don't Your disciples *live* according to the *tradition of the elders*?" *Not*, the heart of God. *Not* the leading of God. *Not* even the actual *WORD* of God, but their traditions.

The traditions of the elders was their north star. Even though their traditions didn't make them more *like* God in His love or His justice or His integrity. For them, the traditions were the goal.

And here's a great irony: Some scholars believe that these particular rules actually came from *Greek* influence.⁶ So, here they are, self-proclaimed experts on what makes a person holy, what makes a person right with God, what makes a person spiritually qualified, only their systems *don't* come from God as a source, but from their own ideas, and in some cases, *Gentile* ideas!

Mark 7:6-7 - ⁶ He answered them, "Isaiah prophesied correctly about you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. ⁷ They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands.,

The scribes said, "We don't like how Your guys handle their bread." Jesus' response was, "Let's talk about how *you* handle the Word of God, which is what you *should* be living on."

He said, "You're hypocrites." Many of you know that term refers to ancient actors who would perform with a mask on. They'd play a part, say their lines, but that's not who they *really* were.

³ Earle

⁴ Acts 15:10

⁵ William Lane *The Gospel Of Mark*

⁶ Craig Keener *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, 2nd Edition*

Interesting piece of trivia: Those masks the actors wore would often have a mouthpiece shaped like a small megaphone.⁷ That way the words they were saying were *amplified* for the audience.

What a perfect example of how legalists act. Caring not about *God's* mouth, but their *own* mouth. They have their rituals, their rules, their supposed holiness, but always done at a loud enough volume to gain applause.

But God was not applauding. Their worship was a farce. They didn't actually *love* Him. It was all a show. And this wasn't something they couldn't have figured out. The Old Testament prophets have *many* instances where God speaks to His people and says, "It's not the ritual I want, it's not the sacrifices, it's your *hearts*." In fact, He would often tell them not to bother with the ceremonies if they weren't going to actually obey Him, actually submit to Him, actually love Him.

I can imagine some of these scribes and Pharisees going to synagogue in the coming weeks and having David's Psalm 26 as part of the worship service. I wonder what they might have thought as they sang: "I do not sit with the worthless or associate with hypocrites...I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, LORD."

Mark 7:8-13 - ⁸ Abandoning the command of God, you hold on to human tradition." ⁹ He also said to them, "You have a fine way of invalidating God's command in order to set up your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said: Honor your father and your mother;, and Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death., ¹¹ But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or mother: Whatever benefit you might have received from me is corban' " (that is, an offering devoted to God), ¹² "you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. ¹³ You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many other similar things."

These guys were convinced that they were the *most* righteous - the *closest* to God. But Jesus said, "You abandon, you invalidate, you nullify what God has actually commanded." They convinced themselves that their ceremonies, their traditions, were what God wanted and, in doing so, they closed their hearts and their ears to what God *actually* said. And God had been clear! "Give Me your heart. Worry about circumcising your *heart* so that you'll *love* Me.

To prove His point, Jesus cites this example of corban. Jewish people had a responsibility, given by God, to care for their aging parents. But the rabbis and scribes and Pharisees had gone so crazy with their traditions and the doctrines of men that here's what was happening: A person could say to his needy parents, "Sorry, I've 'dedicated' all the money I *could* use to help you, so you can't have it." And here's where it led: If you announced your money was *corban*, you didn't have to use it for anything sacred. You could spend it on yourself. *Or* you could give it to someone else. The *only* person you couldn't give it to was your parents.⁸ Because, after all, you made an oath!

⁷ <https://fiveable.me/greek-tragedy/unit-8/masks-costumes/study-guide/oEJXc3Z5xtpRwFZY>

⁸ James Freeman, Harold Chadwick *Manners & Customs of the Bible*

Jesus says, "You're worried about how My guys are handling bread? *That's* what *you* are handing down." But that's exactly what traditionalism does to a spiritual life. It's not just a single mistake or blindspot. Jesus said, "I've got *lots* of examples I could use that are all the same." Because traditionalism hardens hearts and moves us *further* from God, not closer.

We have to be very careful that the forms of our worship don't slowly nullify the Word of God. That our spiritual heritage or culture doesn't pull us away from the commands of God into a traditionalism that simply protects itself. That's what happened to the Pharisees.

Mark 7:14-15 - ¹⁴ Summoning the crowd again, he told them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ Nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile him but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."

Wait - *did Jesus just nullify huge sections of the Law of Moses?!?* He calls the scribes hypocrites for abandoning God's commands but *now* isn't He doing something similar?

We have to understand that this is a watershed moment in theological history. We've seen how throughout this section of Mark there have been Mosaic echoes, revealing Christ was greater than Moses. The feeding the flock in the wilderness. The walking on water. Now, with a crowd gathered before Him, He reveals a new phase in God's household administration.

In Deuteronomy 5, verse 1 we read:

Deuteronomy 5:1 - Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, "Israel, listen to the statutes and ordinances I am proclaiming as you hear them today. Learn and follow them carefully."

Now look at what Jesus is doing. There are times in human history where God pronounces a new way of doing things. Think of how He spoke to Noah after the flood. How He spoke through Moses to the Israelites, establishing a *new* arrangement.

Jesus ushered in a *new* covenant. One very different from the old covenant. *This* is a moment where He starts explaining some of the specifics. One aspect of this new covenant was that the Mosaic dietary restrictions were going away. And, beyond that, He's revealing that people are not considered holy by doing certain religious rituals. No, things were going to be different now.

Mark 7:17 - ¹⁷ When he went into the house away from the crowd, his disciples asked him about the parable.

The disciples understood that something *big* had just happened. Big enough that these guys *struggled* with these issues long after Christ ascended to heaven. Peter had to have a whole vision given *just* to him to get him to see that there was no longer a difference between clean and unclean animals. In fact, he had to receive the vision *three times in a row!*

They *didn't* understand. But remember what Jesus said to them back when He told the parable of the sower and they followed up for more information? He said, "the secret of the Kingdom of God is being given to you." That term "secret" is the word "mystery." Paul would go on to explain that the Church age, the new covenant, contains many *mysteries* that are revealed through the teachings of Christ and the Apostles.

God, in the riches of His grace, gives us wisdom and understanding and makes known to us the mystery of His will to bring all things together in Christ.⁹ That understanding and knowledge is *not* found in human traditionalism, but through divine revelation.

Mark 7:18-19 - ¹⁸ He said to them, "Are you also as lacking in understanding? Don't you realize that nothing going into a person from the outside can defile him? ¹⁹ For it doesn't go into his heart but into the stomach and is eliminated" (thus he declared all foods clean,).

This *doesn't* mean that it doesn't matter what we put in our mouths. It doesn't mean that it's fine to do drugs or that nothing physical matters. Jesus was talking about how a person is considered right with God - what makes a person *holy*.

Under the Law, there was a temporary holiness obtained through ritual, through sacrifices, through diet, and days. But it was not *lasting*. It was a temporary covering for sin. It could never *perfect* the worshipers because it was merely the *shadow* of the good things to come.¹⁰

Now, the Lamb of God had arrived. And He fulfilled the Law so the *new* covenant would begin.

Because Jesus came and accomplished His work, our relationship with God is no longer based on diet or days, but it is based on the Deliverer. *His* triumph, not *our* traditions.

Now remember: The early Church struggled with the issue of the Law. A *lot* of Jewish Christians found it next to impossible to let it go. Mark was writing to a *Gentile* audience. And it's important that they know that getting rid of the dietary rules wasn't just *Paul's* idea or *Peter's* idea, but that Jesus Himself declared all foods clean.

But this is important still today. There are things we do because we're Christian - go to church, read our Bibles, pray, different religious boundaries and systems. Those are good things. They are needful and in many cases *commanded* by God. But we are not made holy by *doing* those things. Hebrews 13 explains that Jesus suffered so that He might *sanctify* His people with His own blood.¹¹

It is the blood of Jesus that makes you holy. So *of course* we no longer have the dietary law. That which before Christ was given as a temporary measure to bring people into holy relationship with God is forever done with because *Christ* provides the covering, the holiness, the robe of

⁹ Ephesians 1:7-10

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:1

¹¹ Hebrews 13:12

righteousness that we need. Qualification and closeness to God is no longer a hand-washing issue. As the Lord was about to point out, it's all about the *heart* now.

Mark 7:20-23 - ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, ²² adulteries, greed, evil actions, deceit, self-indulgence, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within and defile a person."

Sort of a good news/bad news situation. The good news? Bacon's back on the menu. More importantly, we don't have to try to approach God like the scribes, with an ever-expanding, impossible list of arbitrary rules that *no one* can live up to. We don't have to "keep" the Sabbath or "keep" a certain diet or "keep" a certain state of ceremonial cleanness to be able to approach God.

The *bad* news is that the holiness problem is *way* worse than not washing our hands a certain way before eating a biscuit. The *actual* problem is that our *hearts* are defiled. But how do you wash a heart?

While the Pharisees thought their *hands* qualified them for heaven, Jesus reveals that our *hearts* disqualify every last one of us.

As Isaiah said so many centuries before, it's the *heart* that's the problem. David knew it many centuries before *that*. "Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord and stand in His holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart." "Oh, Lord, create in me a *clean* heart!"

Interesting - both the hands and the heart are mentioned in that famous Psalm. You see, it's not that our hands don't have a part to play in our faith - they absolutely do. But Jesus explains here that Godliness and righteousness cannot flow from the outside in. It can *only* flow from the inside out. That a person's *heart* must be cleansed and from that holy heart will flow righteousness and life and spiritual fruit. And God explains that *He* is the only One Who can clean a heart.

In Ezekiel 36 He says He will wash us. *He* will give us a new heart and a new spirit and that *then* we will be obedient to Him and walk in His statutes. *Then* our spiritual lives will be defined not by *tradition*, but by the holy *transformation*. We will be continually *delivered* from those things which seek to defile our lives. And our worship will *not* be in vain because those hearts will not be far from God. Instead, we will have hearts that understand, hearts that pursue the Lord, hearts that really allow God's Word to be inscribed on them, and lives that truly honor Him and work *true* righteousness.

And so tonight we have a chance to ask ourselves: Do we understand? Have we apprehended the new covenant? What it means and how it should work in our hearts and through our lives? Because *that* is what we should be living out. *Not* some traditions of the elders, but the transformation of the Spirit.