

The Lord Denounces the Scribes and Pharisees

Mark 7:1-13

Mark 7:1-13 – *“Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. ² Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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?” ⁶ 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. ⁷ And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ ⁸ 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.” ⁹ He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ ¹¹ 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), ¹² then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, ¹³ making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do.”*

Background Notes

The Pharisees were a Jewish religious party. They arose during the intertestamental period, but their roots went back farther than that. Their original intent was to help the Jewish people maintain their religion and identity in the lands of their captivity, and prevent them from being assimilated into the pagan cultures in which they lived. But Pharisees had become self-righteous in their thinking and proud of their religious observances. They thought they had it made with God because of the strict way they kept the Old Testament Law.

The Scribes were the religious teachers who copied Scripture, and thus they became the official interpreters of Scripture and the Law. They were also the lawyers of the day. Most of the Scribes were from the Pharisee religious party.

The scribes and Pharisees had come to Galilee from Jerusalem, about seventy-five miles. They had come as a fact-finding committee, or really a fault-finding committee. They were sent by the religious leaders in Jerusalem to check out what was going on with this “Jesus of Nazareth” who had become so popular.

So they asked (v5), “Why don’t your disciples keep the traditions of the leaders? Why do they eat with unwashed hands?” The idea here is not that the disciples ate with dirty hands, but that they didn’t go through the *ceremonial* and *ritual cleansings* that the scribes and Pharisees prescribed. The Pharisees went through elaborate rituals as they washed all their dishes and articles. They washed their hands up to their elbows (and sometimes even their whole bodies) when returning home from the marketplace.

Archaeological excavations have uncovered many ritual washing pools or baths in the Holy Land - not only in public places but in private homes as well. An interesting feature of many of these *mikvaot* is that they have a ridge going down the center of the stairway that descends into the bath, so that anyone who was coming up from the bath and was now clean would not come into contact with someone entering the bath, who was still ceremonially unclean. By the way, Ultra-Orthodox Jews today still observe ritualistic washing laws. I understand that the Talmud, which contains the ceremonial laws, has thirty chapters just in connection with the cleansing of vessels!

Well, the Lord told these fault-finders that they were hypocrites. As Isaiah said, they gave lip service to God, but their hearts were far from God. The disciples, on the other hand, might not have washed ceremonially but at least their heart was right. But the Lord went further. Their traditions, He said, were not part of Scripture, and yet they were making them as important as Scripture - and they even set aside Scripture if they found it inconvenient to obey it!

In verses 10-13 the Lord gave another example of how they made their tradition more important than Scripture: “The Old Testament Law commands you to honor your father and mother, and he who curses his father and mother should be put to death. But you scribes and Pharisees have gotten around God’s Law about taking care of your parents. You claim that you’ve dedicated all that you have to God – by designating that all your possessions are *Corban* (a gift or offering). So what you’re saying is, ‘Sorry, Dad and Mom, I can’t help you out because I’ve dedicated all my money and possessions to the Lord. I really would like to help you but I can’t. I’m bound by this oath. I’ve committed everything to the Lord.’”

However, using the excuse of *Corban* was just a selfish way to get around the Law – in fact, they didn’t actually give the money to the Lord! As long as they *labeled* something *Corban*, they could use it for themselves – and that’s all that mattered to them. They even tried to use Scriptures like Numbers 30:1-2, about the seriousness of breaking a vow before the Lord by actually pulling it out of context and using it as a means of setting aside the clear teaching of Scripture to care for their parents. And this was only one of many such acts of hypocrisy.

Doctrinal Points

1. Scripture is the final and ultimate authority.

Scripture is the final authority - not tradition, not even good tradition. And Scripture is the ultimate authority – not the church, regardless of denomination.

Here's an illustration. The Bible says that no one is born a Christian. People become Christians in only one way - through a definite act of the will, acknowledging the Lord Jesus as personal Savior. It doesn't matter what religious tradition you're brought up with. You don't become a Christian by being born into a Christian family. You don't become a Christian by being baptized as a baby. You don't become a Christian by becoming a member of a church. You don't become a Christian by never doing anything really bad. You don't become a Christian by giving away lots of money and doing good works. The Bible is the final authority, and the Bible says that only through trust in Christ can a person become a Christian – no matter what some man-made traditions may say! The Bible is the final and ultimate authority.

2. Scripture is complete and sufficient.

No one should add to Scripture, and no one should take anything away from Scripture. God's Word has been completed, and there is no need to add to it. It already contains everything we need.

In addition, no one should remove anything from God's Word. Deuteronomy 4:2 says, *"You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you."* 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 says, *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

Scripture is complete and sufficient. However, by their tradition, the Jews indicated that the Scripture was not sufficient. They were adding to it, by adding things like ritual washings. They were taking away from Scripture by setting aside the commandments to honor your father and mother. And as a result of adding and taking away from Scripture, they were actually setting Scripture aside completely, and lowering its importance for faith and practice. Remember, the Bible is complete and sufficient. Let's be very careful not add to it - or take away from it!

Practical Applications

1. Let us not add to or take away from Scripture.

The idea that "everybody is going to make it to heaven in the end" is not found in Scripture. The idea of purgatory, of paying for your sins after death, is not found in Scripture. Let's not add to the Bible.

The idea of hell and eternal punishment is part of the Bible. Let's not take that out of the Bible, or water it down. It's not a pleasant doctrine and I don't think we completely understand all aspects of it, but let's be careful not add to or take away from Scripture.

2. Always distinguish between Scripture and tradition.

If we fail to distinguish between Scripture and tradition, we'll likely to end up like the Scribes and Pharisees. They paid lip service to God but they were legalists, hypocrites, and vain worshipers. "*They honor Me with their lips but their hearts are far from Me. In vain they worship me.*" They were religiously proud, and it was the result of not distinguishing between Scripture and tradition.

Now this doesn't mean that we should throw out all tradition! Some traditions are good! But we have to distinguish between what's biblical and what's tradition. How about the tradition of having early morning devotions? That's a good tradition – spending time with the Lord first thing in the morning before becoming preoccupied with all the other events of the day. Many times our Lord went out to be in communion with His Father before daybreak. *But remember* - it's *not* a *law* in the Bible! There's no law in the Bible that says "No Bible, no breakfast!" If you want to be disciplined and follow that good tradition yourself, that's fine. But just don't become a legalist and think everyone should do as you do. And don't become proud, or think that you're more spiritual because you have early morning devotions. Always distinguish between Scripture and tradition!

3. Don't use God as an excuse for neglecting our God-given responsibilities!

That's what the Jews did. The Law gave them the responsibility to care for their parents. They had a financial responsibility to honor their parents, to care for them in old age, but they got around it by saying, "*Corban.*" Many applications could be made here.

We have a God-given responsibility to care for our parents, especially as they grow older. We can't just say, "We can't care for them because all our time and money goes to the church." That would be the same thing the Jews were doing here, using God as an excuse for neglecting their parents. The Lord *condemned* them for failing to fulfill their God-given responsibility, and for excusing their failure with invented "traditions."

We also have a God-given responsibility to raise our children properly. Let's not get so busy with church meetings, or so busy running around to Christian activities, conferences, concerts, etc., that we neglect our families. And then end up saying that we did it for God! Don't use God as an excuse for neglecting your God-given responsibilities.