

August 10, 2025

THE TRADITIONS OF MAN AND THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD

Mark 7:1-23

(15 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

I don't know how many of you have played the board game, *Monopoly*, but since it's been around for a minute, I imagine that most of us have. And if you played this in the Tankersley home in the 80s, there was a square that you always wanted to land on—in addition to Boardwalk, Park Place, or one of the other valuable properties. You wanted to land on free parking. The reason was because along the way, every time you owed money for anything other than rent to your opponents, the money was placed in the middle of the board. And the way you got that money was that you landed on the free parking square. It was one of the most exciting moments for me as a kid when I played *Monopoly* as I would roll the dice and root for them to send me to free parking.

Well, one day I was playing with some friends outside of the Tankersley house, and they drew a card that exacted a financial penalty, and instead of placing the money in the middle of the board, they just paid it to the bank. Now, I strenuously objected, telling them that they were supposed to place it in the middle of the board. They disagreed, and so we grabbed the board and began reading the rules together. And, amazingly, they were right. There's no rule in *Monopoly* that says you should pay money into the middle of the board or that you get that money if you land on the free parking square. Free parking is simply a refuge from having to park on someone else's property and pay a rental fee.

Now, what's odd about this is that as I've talked to numerous people about this and all kinds of people have been confused about this rule. In fact, more people than not that I've spoken with about this played *Monopoly* the way I did. And it raises the question as to how in the world this happened. How did a made-up "house rule" become so well-known by those playing that numerous people just assumed it was an actual rule of the game? Who knows? But interestingly, I think we run into that same kind of issue in the text we're looking at today.

In Mark 7:1-23, we have another confrontation between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees over what was necessary practice for someone to walk in cleanliness (i.e. holiness) before God. The reason for the debate is that there'd been a mixture of the traditions of men into what God actually commanded in the Scripture so that the two had been equated. So, what I want to do is walk through what happened in this encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees and provide some notes of application along the way of warnings and encouragements for holy living. So, let's start with the confrontation that our text tells us about.

The text begins with the Pharisees coming to Jesus with some scribes who had come down from Jerusalem to see Jesus. But they weren't coming to Jesus to learn from him but to try to catch him in error and discredit him. And as they notice the activity of Jesus' disciples, it seems that they've finally gotten their chance. We're told in verse 2 that the scribes and Pharisees caught

Jesus' disciples eating with "hands that were defiled," which is to say the disciples had not washed their hands before eating.

Now, to be clear, the Pharisees weren't concerned about this because of their desire for proper hygiene. Germ theory wasn't all the rage in the first century. They were thinking about holiness. They believed that just as many activities could make one unclean according to the Law of Moses, eating without washing one's hands left one unclean as well. And they'd caught the disciples red-handed. Therefore, they confront Jesus. After all, in their minds, he's the one responsible for making sure his disciples walk in holiness. They ask him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (v. 5).

Now, at this point in the story, we might feel anxious. Maybe we anticipate Jesus answering a bit sheepishly, acknowledging that his disciples aren't quite up to par. But that doesn't happen. And here's the reason it doesn't happen: there is no command in the Bible that people must wash their hands before eating. The only command that comes close is a command exclusively for the priests to wash their hands before going into the tabernacle or eating the sacrificial food—and the disciples weren't priests nor eating sacrificial food.

How then did this Pharisees come to think this was necessary for everyone to wash their hands before eating in order to walk in holiness? The answer is that this came about through the convergence of two streams of thinking and teaching. First, the Old Testament gives a lot of laws without necessarily fleshing out precisely what that looks like in particular situations. Think, for example, about the Sabbath command. If you were an Israelite in the time of the Old Testament, you would have known that you weren't to do any work on the Sabbath. Okay, great. But you might have some questions along the way about what constituted work. Could you make up your bed? Could you brew coffee? Could you take your pet on a walk? You get the picture. And here is where rabbis or elders among the Jews would provide specific answers, putting together a list of specific acts that constituted work. And eventually this list of acts would have been shared and passed around orally until they were regarded as an infallible list of those things that God's command to keep the Sabbath holy forbids. But, as you and I know, this teaching is not on the level of holy Scripture. It's just what the tradition has of the elders has come up with and have been passed down over the years. But these two things were being conflated, like house rules in *Monopoly* being confused for actual rules. That's one stream, the providing of particular applications of God's commands.

The other stream was a tendency to "build a fence around the law." The idea here is that if something is forbidden, then we should make a rule that makes that action impossible. For example, one might say that if God commands a man and a woman not to engage in sexual immorality, then they should never be within fifteen feet of each other until their wedding day. Do you see how that would work? If we make a law that a man and woman couldn't be within fifteen feet of each other, then it'll eliminate the possibility of sexual immorality between the two. We would have created a law that built the fence around the real law. And that kind of "build a fence around the law" practice was taking place in the first century.

So, you had rabbis making specific applications of the law which went beyond the Scriptures as well as making laws that expanded the restrictions of the Scriptures beyond what was written, and—putting these together—you get the establishment of a tradition that everyone must wash hands before eating (as well as cups, bowls, and more). My guess is that their original reasoning was that if its good for priests to wash their hands before handling sacrificial foods, then how much better would it be for everyone to wash hands before handling any food at all? And this was the oral tradition that was passed down until people no longer distinguished between Scriptural commands and the tradition of the elders, again, like house rules with *Monopoly*. That is what led to the Pharisees asking Jesus—in an accusing way—why their disciples don’t wash their hands before eating.

Now, before proceeding through the rest of the story, let me stop and provide an exhortation for us. Make sure the Bible remains your ultimate authority on all doctrine and practice.

### **The Bible must remain your ultimate authority on all doctrine and practice**

The problem with what the Pharisees were saying here is that the tradition of man—concerning beliefs and practices—had come to be equated with if not superseded Scripture itself. And here we must be careful. We see this with the Roman Catholic church, for example, who hold to doctrines like the sinlessness of Mary, the perpetual virginity of Mary, the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven at the end of her life, the doctrine of purgatory, and more. Each of these are not believed because the Bible teaches them. In fact, the Bible flatly contradicts them. They are believed because of tradition. They have been passed down from those before us. And tradition can be good. We’re not the first to read the Bible, and I’m incredibly grateful for centuries of believers who have reflected on the Scripture, wrestled with how to articulated it, and handed it down to us. I don’t know how to speak of the two natures of Christ or the Triune nature of our God apart from their help. And yet all tradition must be weighed against the ultimate authority of Scripture.

And lest we think it’s a problem those Roman Catholics have instead of us, we need to acknowledge that we too can be prone to moving away from the Bible as our ultimate authority. Many times this happens through the bad or good experiences of believers attempting to help others. Let me give you an example. It may be that a believer, for example, abused alcohol at point in his and then concluded that he should no longer drink alcohol, even in moderation. To that person, I want to say, “I agree with you. Well done.” Jesus tells us to be willing to pluck out an eye or cut off a hand to fight sin, and so abstaining from alcohol is certainly no radical measure for a believer to take. But then, that person might take that personal law and try to bind the hearts and consciences of others, telling them that it is sinful to consume alcohol in moderation. Now, that’s elevated a man-made command to the place of Scripture, and we’ve taken it too far.

Paul warned the Corinthians, saying, “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food or drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.” Then, he adds, “Why . . . do you submit to regulations – ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ . . . – according to human

precepts and teaching? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh” (Colossians 2:16, 20-23).

In other words, Paul was telling them that there’s no new covenant law that says you have to avoid certain foods, rest on Saturday, or celebrate this feast or that. These things were regulations others wanted to impose on them that Scripture didn’t command. And I don’t think it’s far-fetched to say that if Paul wrote that to the Colossians, then he’d obviously tell the ones imposing such extra-biblical regulations to stop it. And so we must be on guard against this as well.<sup>1</sup>

And sometimes we can do the same thing because of our good experience. Let’s even take what we do here. We sing four to five songs on a Sunday morning and celebrate communion every Sunday. I think this is good. I love it. I look forward to it. I miss it if it’s not present in a church service. But the Bible doesn’t mandate that much singing or weekly coming to the table. And if you and I judge other churches to be unbiblical because they only sing three songs or celebrate communion monthly, then we’ve made the mistake of elevating our traditions—as good as we might think they are—to the level of God’s commands. And we must not do that.

The Bible must always remain our ultimate authority. The Bereans were commended when they compared what Paul was teaching to the Scripture. And Paul himself commanded the Galatians that if he himself or even an angel from heaven contradicted what he’d written to them in the Holy Scriptures, they were to consider such a one anathema. It’s God himself who commands us to keep the Bible as our ultimate authority. Now, let’s continue the story.

Again, if you thought that Jesus might answer the Pharisees sheepishly or bow to their demands, you’ve probably not been paying attention so far in Mark’s gospel. Jesus typically exposes the sinful hearts of the Pharisees in these confrontations, and he does so here as well. As Jesus responds to the Pharisees, he doesn’t simply point out that they’d wrongly elevated the traditions of man to the place of God’s commands. He points out their hypocrisy—and quite strongly. He responds, “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

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<sup>1</sup>Now, two quick caveats here. First, these may be rules that you personally need to abide by and perhaps it’d be more than helpful for others to do the same. Jesus made clear that if your eye or hand is causing you to sin, you should pluck out your eye or cut off your hand. So, I don’t think Jesus would think it extreme for someone to avoid alcohol or get rid of the smartphone in order to avoid sin. But we don’t have the liberty to take things that God hasn’t labeled “sin” and demand that others refrain from them. That’s what Paul was telling the Colossians not to allow in their midst. And it’s obviously what the Pharisees and scribes did here. And let me make one more caveat. Often when this point is made, people begin to think of their employer or the school they’re part of that made them sign a code of conduct policy that demands things that the Bible doesn’t demand. And they might feel at this point like they have license to ignore these demands. So I want to say clearly that as long as you’re employed at that place of work or enrolled as a student at that school, you have to abide by the policy. You’re not required to work there or go to school there. But as long as you do, you have to abide by their rules.

doctrines the commandments of men.’ You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men” (vv. 6-8). Then, Mark tells us that he added, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition” (v. 9).

So, Jesus says that they’re *leaving* the commandment of God to hold to their traditions and that they’re *rejecting* the commandment of God in order to establish their traditions. What’s he talking about? Well, he gives an example. He says, “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 his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (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” (vv. 10-13).

Now, the idea of Corban is that you give something to be devoted to the Lord. Imagine, for example, that you have a few acres of farmland, and you decide that you want to devote this land to the Lord. Well, that’s a good thing. So, you would exercise the practice of Corban, where you would notify the religious leaders that you’re committing your land to the Lord, and what this would mean is that once you died, the land would become the property of the religious leaders (to be used of the Lord). Again, all that sounds great.

Well, there was one stipulation. After you committed the land to Corban, you could still use the land for yourself if you wanted to continue farming it. In fact, the land could benefit you until you died. However, the land could not be used to benefit others (e.g., your parents). After all, you had given the land to the Lord, not to your parents.

Now, imagine that you’d employed this practice and committed your land to the Lord. Then, your parents suffered a financial catastrophe and needed your help. But the only way you could help them was by giving the land to your parents or selling it and giving them the proceeds. Well, if you went to the religious leaders and said, “I need to use my land for my parents’ well-being,” the Pharisees would have answered, “No. You’ve already devoted it to the Lord.”

Thus, Jesus points out that though the law clearly commanded that one should honor his parents and that to revile one’s parents was a crime punishable by death, they were not permitting one to honor his parents because he had to abide by the tradition of the elders—in this practice of Corban. What may well have started as something good had morphed into something that kept one from obeying God’s commands. And Jesus noted that many other such things they did.

This is why Jesus calls the Pharisees and scribes hypocrites. They’re supposedly establishing all of these extra-biblical practices because they want to be really holy. But in reality they’re no longer even striving to practice biblical commands, and they’re keeping others from obeying them as well. But why is this a warning to us? Here’s why. Gospel-empty, extra-biblical rules will only lead to hypocrisy and judgmentalism.

**Gospel-empty, extra-biblical rules will only lead to hypocrisy and judgmentalism**

Now, it's clear this was true of the Pharisees and scribes. They weren't believing in Jesus, so they were gospel empty. They'd established extra-biblical rules, but they weren't even obeying biblical rules. And they were judging Jesus' disciples for not obeying their extra-biblical rules. Okay. Fair. But why make this point for us? Let's see if I can explain.

When you and I begin to move away from the Bible to other things that rule our lives, we're moving ourselves away from the very thing the Lord has given to transform us and keep us from being renewed to the Scripture. We're removing ourselves from the gospel, which is given to us in Scripture. And we're removing ourselves from God's Word, which is profitable for teaching, training, rebuking, and disciplining us in righteousness.

And when we don't fight to renew our minds to God's Word, the Scripture says that we're denying ourselves of what was given to keep us from being conformed to this world. Thus, though we may preach godliness, we'll become hypocrites. And once we are walking in sinful patterns, unless we repent and turn to the gospel as our only hope, we'll become to judge and condemn others—like a drowning man who sees his only hope as drowning those around him. This is where the Pharisees were. They didn't believe the gospel but focused on extra-biblical rules instead of Scripture, and because those things were powerless to overcome the indulgence of their flesh, they were judgmental hypocrites. That's the danger of not keeping the Bible our consistent ultimate authority and focus. But let's get back to the story to see one final note.

In verses 14-23, Jesus tells his disciples what their focus must be. He declares, "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 (v. 15)." Then, Mark tells us that his disciples still don't get it. And Jesus is amazed that they still don't understand. So, he tells them that food doesn't make you unclean, since you just expel it. And in this, Jesus tells us that there is no food that God forbids us to eat.

But then he tells them positively what *does* defile us, saying, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him, for from within, out of the heart of a man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (vv. 20-23).

So, if these sins come from within our hearts, then we can only rightly pursue holiness by focusing on our hearts. This is why gospel-empty, extra-biblical rules are insufficient. We could take the internet out of every home as a safeguard for our children, but that wouldn't be sufficient to stop them from giving in to covetous and lust. We who lived before the internet know this, don't we? And the reason why is because covetous and lust come from our hearts, which leads to our last observation—we pursue holiness from gospel-saturated, transformed hearts.

**True holiness will only come from gospel-saturated, transformed hearts**

Let me illustrate this by asking a question. In heaven, will we need God's commandments like do not covet, do not murder, and the like written down everywhere? No. But why? The answer, of course, is that our hearts will be so transformed in that day that we won't want to covet or murder. We'll love God and neighbor perfectly.

That's right, and that's why holiness must begin with saturating our hearts in the gospel. Only when we realize how much we're loved by the one who gave himself up for us and rose from the dead will our hearts be moved to love him. And only when we realize all we have through his gospel work will we be free to love others and not feel the need to covet what our neighbor has or long for the fleeting pleasures of sin.

Now, this doesn't mean we don't exercise discipline. We certainly do. I've put guardrails on my phone, am very careful about what I watch, go to bed somewhat early, and on and on. But I know that all those things are insufficient to produce holiness without my heart loving God and my neighbor. And I know that this only comes through a heart that is saturated in the gospel. And so I need to renew my heart constantly to the good news that my Lord loved me and gave himself for me so that I have everything I could ever want in him. Because of that, I want to love and obey him. So let's pursue obedience to our Lord in every detail he commands from hearts that are saturated in the gospel. And let's make that our commitment today as we come to the table. Amen.