Tradition or Truth?

Subtitle: Breaking the Cycle of Empty Religion

Main Scripture

Matthew 15:2 (NKJV)
“Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.”

Key Thought

Tradition can help us understand and apply Scripture, but it must never be given the same authority as God’s Word.

Big Idea

God is not looking merely for outward conformity. He desires inward transformation. Human traditions produce empty words when they replace Scripture, but God’s truth penetrates the heart and changes the way we live.

Supporting Scriptures

- Mark 7:3
- Galatians 1:14
- Matthew 12:34
- Matthew 15:1–9
- Mark 7:1–13

Understanding the Tradition of the Elders

The “tradition of the elders” was a growing body of oral teaching developed to expand the written law and apply it to new situations.

The Greek word **parádosis** means “a giving over.” It describes teaching handed down from one person or generation to another, either orally or in writing.

These traditions generally included:

1. Oral laws believed to have been given to Moses in addition to the written law.
2. Decisions made by judges that became precedents in legal matters.
3. Interpretations from respected rabbis that eventually received authority comparable to Scripture.

Core Points

1. Tradition is external, but truth transforms the heart

Tradition can regulate outward behavior without producing inward change. God's truth reaches the heart, confronts our motives, and transforms our character.

"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."
Matthew 12:34

2. Tradition becomes dangerous when it rivals Scripture

The Pharisees established codes of conduct that were treated as equal to God's written Word. Churches can repeat this mistake when preferences, customs, policies, and cultural expectations are presented as biblical commands.

3. Tradition can produce empty religion

People may follow traditions to please others, preserve their status, or appear spiritually mature. Biblical obedience, however, is motivated by a desire to please God.

Paul once described himself as being extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers, yet zeal alone did not make those traditions spiritually correct.

4. Human rules can weaken the authority of God's Word

When believers obey human traditions while ignoring Scripture, they rob themselves of the Word's transforming power. The issue is not simply whether a tradition is old or new. The question is whether it agrees with God's Word.

5. Ceremonialism focuses on appearances

Jesus showed that shallow traditionalism can develop into ceremonialism and externalism. It becomes more concerned with looking right than being right before God.

6. The heart is the true source of conduct

Jesus taught that spiritual uncleanness originates within the heart. Rules can limit certain actions, but only God's truth can change the thoughts, desires, motives, and character producing those actions.

7. Traditions must remain servants of Scripture

Traditions are not automatically wrong. They become harmful when they:

- Contradict Scripture
- Replace clear biblical teaching
- Become tests of someone's salvation or spirituality
- Prevent necessary change
- Place unnecessary burdens on people
- Receive authority that belongs only to God's Word

Questions for Reflection

1. What church practices have we followed without examining their biblical basis?
2. Have we given any human-made rules, policies, or doctrines the same authority as Scripture?
3. Who originally established these rules, and who continues to enforce them?
4. Do these traditions encourage spiritual growth, or do they create unnecessary barriers?
5. Have we judged someone's faithfulness based on personal preferences rather than biblical truth?
6. Why are certain secondary rules important within our church culture?
7. How can we keep secondary matters from receiving the same importance as biblical commands?
8. Is there a tradition I defend more passionately than I obey God's Word?
9. Does my faith emphasize outward appearance or genuine transformation of the heart?

Personal Application

This week, identify one religious practice, personal belief, or church expectation you have accepted without questioning. Examine it honestly through Scripture.

Ask:

- Is it clearly commanded by God?
- Is it a helpful tradition or a human-made law?
- Does it support biblical truth or compete with it?
- Does it help people grow, or does it create unnecessary judgment?
- Am I obeying it to please God or to gain the approval of people?

Hold tightly to God's unchanging principles, but remain willing to evaluate the methods and traditions surrounding them.

Final Takeaway

God's principles never change, and His Word does not need human additions. Traditions should help us understand and obey God's Word, not become laws themselves.