

**Religious Tradition, Defilement, and Hypocrisy: Part 1**  
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**Original: 1-14-24**

**Text:** Mark 7:1-13 (see also Matt. 15:1-20)

**Gospel of Mark:** [Bibliography](#) or [Manuscripts and Greek Exegesis](#)

**UBS 4<sup>th</sup> Edition Paragraph Topic:** The Tradition of the Elders

**Central Idea of Message:** Hypocrisy occurs when our internal does not match our external. Authentic Christianity demands inward *and* outward purity.

**Introduction:** Hypocrite. Even uttering the word gives us the creeps. It's a word nobody wants applied to themselves. But here it is. And it's Jesus who uses it.

Jesus has just fed over 5,000 people. He had started with just five loaves of bread and two fish. His disciples had picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers. These leftovers, as we will see, play a role in this pericope, or story, currently under our consideration.

Jesus is about to give the Pharisees and scribes a much needed lesson on religious tradition, defilement, and hypocrisy as they clash with him over the basic issue of the source of authority. Was it the elders and Rabbis or was it God?

Perhaps Haddon Robinson summarizes well the essence of this passage when he writes, "**I do not want a religion I have to carry...but one that carries me**" (Robinson in Cooper 117). Authentic Christianity, as Jesus demonstrated, is that religion!

**I. Clean and Unclean (vv. 1-4)**

- A. Pharisees and scribes gather around Jesus [Incoming! Hostiles!] (v. 1)
  - 1. From Jerusalem: scribes traveled about 100 miles to confront Jesus along with what was probably local Pharisees
  - 2. Pharisee
    - a) Strict party of the Jews
    - b) Very legalistic [established rules and regulations well beyond Scripture which they believed by keeping they earned righteousness]
  - 3. Scribe

- a) Transcribers [copying machines] of the Old Testament writings
  - b) Experts in the Law of Moses, its interpretation, and its application
  - c) Likely the ones even the Pharisees ["lay followers" of the scribes] relied upon for interpretation (cf. Grant 747)
4. The last time Mark mentioned the Pharisees they were plotting together with the Herodians to kill Jesus (cf. Mark 3:6)
- B. Some Pharisees and scribes had seen Jesus' disciples breaking one of their rules (v. 2)
- 1. Some of the disciples had been seen eating bread without first washing their hands [perhaps bread fragments leftover from the feeding of the 5,000]
  - 2. One commentator suspects word of the feeding of the 5,000 had gotten out and that there had been no cleansing urged before the feeding, for there would have been no way for the crowd to wash thoroughly (cf. Mills)
  - 3. "The objection raised is on ceremonial, not sanitary, grounds" (Robertson 1:321)
  - 4. External observance to be seen by others was extremely important to the Pharisees and scribes and infractions of their oral traditions were not tolerated
  - 5. **Too much emphasis placed on externals raises questions about too little emphasis on internals**
    - a) Jesus knew these Pharisees and scribes were negative characters who were already critics of him and his ministry
    - b) Jesus also knew that they were hypocrites, meaning men who pretended to be holier than they really were
- C. The washing tradition of the Pharisees (v. 3)
- 1. Pharisees and most Jews didn't eat before carefully washing their hands like a surgeon
  - 2. This was a tradition from Jewish elders which had been passed down through the years
    - a) Elders
      - (1) Elder men of rank and influence
      - (2) "Esteemed ancestors" (Godwin 63)
      - (3) May be a reference to two of the most influential of all Rabbis, Hillel and Shammai (cf. Mills)

- (4) Refers to men in the Sanhedrin, the great council of the Jews
- b) **Many of these oral traditions had been passed down for years and were finally written down around A.D. 200 in what is called the Mishnah (cf. Lane 678) and the two Talmuds (cf. Grant 749)**
- 3. While it certainly is a good idea to wash our hands before eating, which is just good hygiene, it does nothing for spiritual cleanliness
- D. More washing rituals passed on by the elders (v. 4)
  - 1. When the Pharisees and scribes returned home from the marketplace they cleansed themselves before they ate
  - 2. Mark notes that there were many other traditions they observed which related to washing, like cleansing cups, pitchers, and copper pots
  - 3. **Cleanliness is next to godliness, but these men were more than OCD, they were wanting to put on a show of their holiness for all to see, and therein lies the rub...it was all a show**

## II. God's Laws and Man-Made Laws (vv. 5-8)

- A. The Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus why his disciples did not walk according to the tradition of the elders (v. 5)
  - 1. They did not ask him why he did not observe the Old Testament!
  - 2. To them, Jesus was merely an uneducated layman
  - 3. **Honoring traditions [historical positions] is foremost in the eyes of some**
    - a) Sometimes we observe or honor something and we don't even know why
    - b) We often look upon with contempt, or even scold, those who violate what we think should be honored
  - 4. The Pharisees and scribes were heaping scorn on Jesus and his disciples because they saw the faults of his disciples as an indictment on him, their Teacher
- B. Rightly did Isaiah prophesy about hypocrites: Jesus cited the respected prophet Isaiah (vv. 6-8; cf. Isa. 29:13)
  - 1. "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (v. 6)

- a) Please notice that Jesus did not answer their question
  - (1) Instead, he begins to point out their hypocrisy using words from the highly respected prophet Isaiah
  - (2) This is, perhaps, where the term "lip service" originated
  - (3) Please also notice the repeated use of the Old Testament by Jesus himself, which reaffirms its inspiration, validity, and authority
- b) **The definition of hypocrisy is pretending to be something we are not by acting without sincerity**
- c) Jesus recognized the act the Pharisees and scribes put on in public
- 2. "But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (v. 7)
  - a) **The substance of hypocrisy is fabricating man-made rules and giving them the status of being God-given**
  - b) This sort of worship goes nowhere with God!
- 3. "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men" (v. 8)
  - a) **The fallacy of this hypocrisy is that it omits commandments which are God-given and keeps the traditions which are man-given**
  - b) Such "transfer of allegiances" should be avoided at all costs (cf. Decker 186)

### III. A Sinful Regulation (vv. 9-13)

- A. Jesus chided the Pharisees and scribes by saying, "You nicely set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition" (v. 9)
  - 1. Not only did these Pharisees and scribes not keep certain commandments from God and elevate man-made traditions over God-given commandments, but also had to violate certain God-given commandments in order to keep their traditions!
  - 2. **One would think that a person with any discernment whatsoever would know that having to violate a commandment from God in order to keep a tradition from men would render the tradition not only subordinate, but also invalid because of such obvious distortion**

3. **But not these men - they had long since departed from the path of faithful obedience to God and credible spiritual discernment to following their elders and the traditions they had created right into the deepest of ditches**
- B. Jesus gave an example (vv. 10-13)
1. Jesus cited Exod. 20:12, or Deut. 5:16, one of the ten commandments, and connected Exod. 21:17 to it as well when he said, "Honor your father and mother; and, he who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death" (v. 10)
    - a) Imagine for a moment how insulting this was to the scribes and Pharisees, experts in the Law of Moses, for Jesus to quote and expound to them the Law of Moses!
    - b) Speaking evil to parents is the equivalent of cursing them and is dishonoring
      - (1) Literally, "Come to an end by death"
      - (2) Use of two words for "death" is emphatic and certain
      - (3) Anyone who treated parents this way was in danger of receiving the death penalty
    - c) **Better to spank an unruly, disrespectful child early rather than see him or her incarcerated or, even worse, killed because of their foolishness and disrespect for people or laws they should have held in high esteem**
    - d) **Those disrespectful toward their own parents can make for very bad neighbors**
  2. But the Pharisees and scribes would then withhold something their aging parents could have benefitted from by claiming that the money or item was Corban, given or dedicated to God (v. 11)
    - a) "Corban" was a formula for dedicating something to God
      - (1) Whether property or money
      - (2) This was a vow, a type of Jewish oath, that the item could only be used for religious purposes
    - b) Present tense, so this is not something just done in the past but still being done at that time by these men and others like them

- c) This was simply a convenient designation so they could keep the money or item for themselves and not have to part with it
  - d) Let dad and mom do without and hide behind a religious facade to make themselves look holy
  - e) Such a tradition left a seemingly religious loophole for someone not to do anything for a needy father or mother, all in the name of piety, even though the common practice of that day in the ancient Near East was that it was a duty for children to care for their aging parents
3. Jesus accused them of having many traditions of this nature which, if observed, invalidated God's word (v. 13)
- a) Jesus considered the Old Testament, specifically here in this encounter the words of Isaiah and Moses, as having been spoken by God
  - b) Man-made rules can nullify God's word
  - c) Invalidating the word of God is dulling the two-edged sword

**Conclusion: Principles.**

(1) **Commandments from God are primary and commandments from man are secondary in validity - a far distant second.**

(2) **If we are put in a position of breaking a commandment from God in order to keep a commandment from man, we must choose to break the commandment from man and keep the commandment from God.**

(3) **Cleanliness is consistent with godliness, but internal cleanliness is more important than external cleanliness.**

(4) **While it can be valuable that some of our beliefs and practices are *linked* to the past, these must never solely be tied to the past but to God's word.**

(5) **Hypocrisy occurs when our internal does not match our external. Authentic Christianity demands inward *and* outward purity.**

(6) **We are truly spiritually clean only in so far as we are clean in motive, attitude, and thought (cf. Peterson 56).**

(7) **Authentic Christianity is not ritual but righteousness, manifesting itself in love and service to God rather than in rules to be kept.**

(8) We must all be careful not to let our Christian faith "degenerate into mere motions without religious or ethical significance" (Luccock 748).

(9) Never embrace as valid anything that distorts, obscures, or nullifies God's written word.

(10) Just as with the Pharisees and scribes in Jesus' day, honoring tradition or man-made documents over Scripture can blind us to truth [they could not see Jesus for who and what he really was]. This is often true today with Jews, Catholics, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The best safeguard is *Sola Scriptura*, Latin for "Scripture alone."

(11) If we are in a discussion with someone regarding Christianity's do's and don'ts, do what Jesus did and make people argue with *Scripture* and not with us.

(12) Nullifying the word of God makes it sterile, rendering it incapable of producing its intended moral effects, so we should never be guilty of neutralizing God's word even when popular culture screams that we must [most notably on questions regarding immorality].

(13) Is there any part of God's word which you might be guilty of distorting, obscuring, or even nullifying? Stop it!