

Traditions Versus Commandments
Matthew 15:1-9
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The connection between Matthew 14 and Matthew 15 involves the issue of defilement. In Matthew 14:36, Jesus allowed strangers to touch His cloak in order to become healed. The Pharisees would never have allowed this out of concern that such touching could potentially render themselves ceremonially unclean. Jesus did not become unclean by touching people, even a leper, who rather became clean through Jesus' touch (Matthew 8:1-4). This misunderstanding of what renders someone unclean is central to what was wrong with the Pharisees and scribes.

The Pharisees' charge against the disciples of Jesus (15:1-2)

The Pharisees and scribes were last seen in Matthew 12:38, where they demand more signs (attesting miracles) from Jesus. These Pharisees and scribes have traveled from Jerusalem to increase their opposition to Jesus. That they came from Jerusalem likely meant they held greater authority than the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus had encountered in Galilee.

Scribes were the legal experts of Israel. They drafted legal documents and controlled the legal system of the nation. The Pharisees were experts on the religious tradition of Jews and considered this to be the necessary application of the Old Testament Law. Therefore, there was great commonality between these two groups. The Pharisees were more of a religious sect and the scribes were more of an occupation, therefore, while these groups were distinct, there were scribes who were also Pharisees.

The Pharisees and scribes addressed their criticism of Jesus toward His disciples. Earlier the criticisms had been spoke to the disciples about the conduct of Jesus (*"When the Pharisees saw this, they said to His disciples, 'Why is your Teacher eating with the tax collectors and sinners?'"* in Matthew 9:11). They then increased their attack by asking Him directly about the conduct of His disciples (*"But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, 'Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath'"* in Matthew 12:2). In Matthew 12:38, we saw the Pharisees and scribes join together in demanding a sign from Jesus. Now Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem address Him about the practice of His disciples.

The disciples did not wash their hands when they ate bread because this was the practice of Jesus, *“When the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal”* (Luke 11:38). This was considered to *“break the tradition of the elders.”* This criticism was therefore not directly about a violation of the Old Testament Law, but of their traditional practice in light of the Law. Mark’s account of this traditional practice is detailed, *“For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots”* (Mark 7:3-4).

The Old Testament provides regulations for the priests for washing their hands in their service of the tabernacle (Exodus 30:17-21; Deuteronomy 21:1-9), but this was not addressed to everyone in the nation. The Pharisees considered the requirements of the priesthood to be the necessary practice of all Jews. This perspective led to this becoming *“the traditions of the elders.”*

These traditions of the elders were the rabbinical interpretations of the Old Testament Law that had been built over centuries. It was originally in oral form, passed down in what is known as the Halakah. This oral tradition was viewed just as authoritatively as the written Law of Moses as this oral tradition explained and applied the Law. This oral tradition was later codified in written form in the Mishnah by 200 A.D. One entire section of the Mishnah involved the cleansing of hands and even to the point of how much water should be used for washings. Eventually, even these written interpretations of the Law of Moses would gain their own extensive rabbinical commentary, called the Gemara, which became the essential component of the Talmud (the Mishnah and the Gemara), the final authority on these traditions by 500 A.D.

That the Pharisees and scribes were concerned with breaking the traditions of the elders demonstrated their view that disciples were morally obligated to follow the traditions of the elders. That the Pharisees and scribes were concerned with the washing of hands demonstrated that they were scrupulous about the details of the traditions of the elders.

Also, that the Pharisees and scribes had come from Jerusalem to make this accusation, demonstrated that the religious leaders were observing the practices of the disciples of Jesus and were scrutinizing them in order to accuse Jesus. This continued the progressive development of the opposition by these religious leaders against Christ.

Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees (15:3-9)

Jesus did not specifically address their issue of hand washing prior to eating but instead He spoke to their failure to be faithful to God's revealed will because of their traditions. Like the modern saying, "the best defense is a good offense," Jesus does not defend His disciples but condemns the Pharisees. This explanation of their failure will unfold progressively throughout His statement to them.

1. They transgressed the word of God (15:3-4)

Their first failure was breaking the commandment of God themselves. He makes a strong distinction between the commandment of God and their traditions. What the Pharisees and scribes considered to be "*the traditions of the elders*," Jesus called, "*your tradition*." He considered them to be responsible for these additions to the Law of Moses. This is an implicit denial that these traditions were representative of the Old Testament Law.

The specific commandment of God that the Pharisees and scribes transgressed was the fifth of the ten commandments: "*Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you*" (Exodus 20:12) and "*He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death*" (Exodus 21:17). In Matthew, Jesus referred to the fifth of the ten commandments as what "*God said*." Mark's Gospel attributes these words to Moses (Mark 7:11). Jesus recognized what the Old Testament recorded was what God said.

This is an accusation against these religious leaders. The word "you" is in an emphatic position in the Greek text, meaning Jesus emphasized their responsibility in the transgression. The motive for their transgression is also identified as "*for the sake of your tradition*." Because of their allegiance to their tradition, they transgressed the commandment of God.

Whenever people become more concerned about what man says rather than what God says, it leads to ignoring the word of God. As attention is given to the words of people, it becomes easier to give less attention to the words of God. Once the word of God is diminished, it is able to be transgressed because other things become more important. This is particularly true in areas that we do not want to obey. We seek reasons why the commandment of God does not apply to our situation when we have other sources of authority that will exempt us from such obedience to God's commands.

2. They invalidated the word of God (15:5-6)

Matthew 15:5 explains the way that they transgress the commandment of God for the sake of their tradition, *“But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God.’”* Their rabbinical tradition taught that if a person vowed to give something to God, such as funds pledged to the temple (cf. Matthew 27:6), then that vow could not be broken, regardless of how it affected other responsibilities a person may have. These funds then could not be transferred to another cause.

What would motivate a person to pledge money to God, while ignoring their responsibilities to their father or mother? Certain circumstances existed that could lead a person to act this way. The scribes were condemned by Jesus for devouring widow’s houses, with an example of this being the poor widow who out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on (Luke 20:47-21-4). Religious leaders throughout history have pressured people to give money to their religious causes, from ornate cathedrals and souls supposedly freed from purgatory, to modern ministry enterprises that build their brand. While religion never has enough money, God is fully able to accomplish His will regardless of financial resources.

Furthermore, the Jewish religious system displayed those giving gifts. Jesus, like everyone else, was able to observe those who were giving *“He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury”* (Luke 21:1). This is why Jesus taught, *“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you”* (Matthew 6:2-4). When people were seen putting their gifts into the treasury, they were able to be honored by men. This benefit, or *“reward in full”* serves the giver and could be preferred over supporting that person’s own father and mother.

Finally, in light of the larger families of the people of the first century, a person could expect other siblings to provide the care and support that their father or mother might require. Therefore, it would not only be the father or mother who was not honored, but other family members would have their burden increased. This leadership by the Pharisees and scribes resulted in the religious validation of the practice of transgressing the commandment to honor a person’s father and mother.

There is an underlying presupposition that exists in Matthew 15:5, where the spirit of the command to honor father and mother is in force. Honoring father and mother is not an absolute where the wishes of a father or mother must be followed. Jesus Himself taught that *“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me”* (Matthew 8:21-22; 10:37). This is not at all like what the Pharisees and scribes were guilty of, since the context of Jesus’ words presupposed the opposition to God by the parents and would result in the persecution of the disciples.

Since Jesus had all authority (cf. Matthew 28:20), He was righteous in commanding allegiance to Him first of all, as the Son of God. The traditions of the elders held no such authority. Our obedience to the commandment to honor our father and mother is the result of our great love for Jesus. The proper motivation for following any commandment in serving others is rooted in our own love of the Lord.

Beyond their violation of God’s revealed will, the Pharisees and scribes fostered the practice of others to also violate God’s revealed will themselves. It is in this sense that Jesus condemns them for *“invalidating the word of God.”* By furthering their traditions, the commands of God became optional and thus nullified. The effect upon the Jewish people was certainly the diminishing of obedience to God.

Mark adds that this issue of invalidating the word of God was not limited to the honoring of one’s father and mother. *“But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that”* (Mark 7:11-13). The Pharisees and scribes did many other such things as allowing people to avoid honoring their mother and father. These types of exemptions directly served to undermine God’s word among the Jewish people.

People have been led to invalidate the word of God today by finding extenuating circumstances for why God’s revealed will is impractical for our lives. It may be certain outcomes that we fear might arise if we truly followed the word of God. It may be an unwillingness to yield our previous way of thinking about things to God’s word. At times, we will even find some religious term to support our resistance, such as loving, serving, conviction, conscience, God’s leading, causing others to stumble, etc. in our search for loopholes in God’s word.

3. They replaced the word of God (15:7-9)

The final effect of violating the commandments of God and invalidating the word of God was to replace the word of God with the commandments of men. This is what Jesus meant by *“teaching as doctrine the precepts of men.”* This error is the essence of legalism, which inserts man’s opinion as the doctrine of God.

The Pharisees and scribes replaced the word of God by practicing hypocrisy. They projected an external righteousness based on their adherence to their own doctrines and practices and not an internal righteousness based upon faithfulness to God’s word. More than just profess the truth but not live the truth, they failed to even profess the truth in their pursuit of external religion. While this is the first time in Matthew that Jesus called the Pharisees “hypocrites,” He spoke repeatedly against their teaching in Matthew 5 by contrasting *“you have heard that it was said”* with *“but I say to you.”*

Isaiah spoke to the people of Israel over seven hundred years earlier regarding their similar replacement of true worship with the external rituals of man. *“Then the Lord said, ‘Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote’”* (Isaiah 29:13). The Jews of Jerusalem had substituted their empty words for true heartfelt worship by setting aside the authority of God’s word.

While such traditions of men purport to worship God, in reality, it is merely from the lips, not from the heart. Claims of worship and even rigorous activity of worship are actually in vain when it is inconsistent with the will of God. We can even think we are worshiping God but our worship is in vain when we substitute God’s word with the practices of men. It is imperative that we recognize what is necessary in obedience to God versus what is merely our religious and cultural custom.

After Jesus had taught against the legalism of man’s traditions replacing the word of God, Paul restated this same exhortation in his letter to the Colossians, *“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence”* (Colossians 2:20-23).

Paul notes that legalism has the “*appearance of wisdom*” but it is completely worthless in the pursuit of righteousness, as it is “*of no value against fleshly indulgence.*” As those who have died with Christ, such external, religious enticement should have no attraction for us. These teachings are “*destined to perish with the use*” because they accomplish nothing once they are over.

Later, Paul instructed Titus to correct those at Crete, “*For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth*” (Titus 1:13-14). The urgency of refusing the commandments of men who turn away from the truth could not be clearer.

Conclusion

Even though Isaiah rebuked the nation for adherence to the doctrine of men over the precepts of God, the Jewish people continued to pass down their traditions. When Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for this same hypocrisy, the oral tradition of the day would become codified in the Mishnah within a few generations, finally becoming the Talmud, which included even more interpretations of man to clarify their human traditions.

The history of the church did not fare any better. Though Jesus and the New Testament clearly spoke against the establishment of the traditions of men, the Church soon began to practice monasticism, the withdrawal from society to pursue righteousness, and asceticism, severe self-discipline in the pursuit of righteousness, as early as the third century. When the church began institutionalization in Rome, the plethora of extra-biblical doctrines and practices grew, ultimately leading to the official recognition of the authority of church tradition by the Roman Catholic Church. This is known as the Magisterium, which is the Roman Catholic Church’s claimed authority to give the correct interpretation of the word of God, “whether it is in written form, or in the form of Tradition,” according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

The Protestant reformers opposed the Magisterium, yet were trapped in their own elements of legalism. From the ascetic practices of the anabaptists leading to the Amish today, to the adoption of formal authoritative creeds of the church by the Lutherans and Presbyterians, to adherence to various standards of worship, legalism did not disappear, but rather was reconstituted.

The Fundamentalist movement to restore the authority of the word of God in response to the attack of theological liberalism eventually devolved into similar legalism. They became noted for their long list of prohibitions, including alcohol consumption, theater attendance, dancing, card playing, etc. Their additions to true biblical sins undermined the very word of God that they sought so eagerly to defend.

We can observe that many problems in churches are rooted in the elevation of man's opinions to the level of the word of God. Church leaders often believe they know best what people ought to do and create requirements for righteousness in accordance with their own interest. When we pridefully seek to conform our fellow believers to our standards of measure, we invalidate the word of God, and our worship is in vain as we will be judged by our standard of measure, *"Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you"* (Matthew 7:1-2). This is why Jesus taught to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees (Matthew 16:12).