

## Tradition and God's Word

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Mark 7 tells one of the more well-known accounts of Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees. The Pharisees and some scribes had seen Jesus' disciples eating with "impure" or unwashed hands. The tradition of the elders was that they were to wash their hands very carefully before eating, and then when they return from the market place they would not eat unless carefully cleaning themselves. Additionally, "there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots." So these Pharisees confronted Jesus about his disciples not doing this: "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" (v. 5)

Before considering Jesus' answer, let's note a few items. First, there is something good about keeping yourself clean. Washing hands before you eat is good practice; there was nothing inherently wrong here, and most of us would promote this as healthy practice. Second, tradition, in itself, is not the problem. It is simply something that is passed down to others. Tradition is unavoidable in many ways. Coupled with being clean in this context, tradition can be noteworthy and good. It is something we might all like to pass down to our children. Third, notice that the appeal of the Pharisees is the tradition. They did not ask about the disciples breaking the Law of God.

The essence of Jesus' response is: first, He called these Pharisees hypocrites; second, He quoted Isaiah 29; third, He showed how they were placing their traditions above God's commandments.

Isaiah 29 comes in the middle of a context in which Isaiah is rebuking God's people for the sins of idolatry and apathy toward His covenant. The first chapter of Isaiah rebukes Israel for merely going through the motions without really desiring to please God. They were offering their sacrifices, but then they were going out and committing all kinds of evil. Ironically, Isaiah does tell the people to wash themselves and make themselves clean (Isa 1:16). However, his emphasis was not physical, spiritual: "Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight." This was the way they were to clean themselves, and it is a far more important kind of washing than we can ever do with the hands.

In Isaiah 29, one of the phrases is this: "their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote" (v. 13). That is, the extent of their respect for God was, at best, learned tradition. That tradition was not in itself the Law. They appeared to care little for the Law itself, but were concerned about keeping a tradition in place even though it was not Law.

When Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites, He was noting how they were neglecting the commandments of God for the sake of their traditions. Now here they were chastising others for failing to keep a tradition while they themselves were guilty of the violation of God's commands. The beam in their eye was much larger than any speck in the eyes of the

disciples of Jesus, who were not breaking God's Law on this occasion.

Traditions are a part of life. We really cannot do without them. To one degree or another, all that we know is passed down. Railing against tradition just because something is a tradition is rather naive. Even the commands of God are traditions handed down to us (2 Thess 2:15).

How we act about these traditions may be another matter. Again, we must distinguish between traditions that are commandments of God and traditions that are handed down otherwise. If we put man-made traditions on par with, or even over, God's word, then we are guilty of something very insidious. This is the point made in Isaiah 29:15-16. By putting their own traditions on par with God's commands, they were essentially saying that they were God's equal. They were guilty of pulling God down to their level and acting as though He did not have sufficient understanding of what they needed. They were smarter than God. If we think that breaking our own human traditions is on par with breaking God's word, then we are guilty of bringing God down to our level. That's serious business for which we need to repent.

Jesus illustrated how they had disrespected God by showing their neglect of the command to honor father and mother. They were more concerned about washing their hands than they were about caring for their parents. Talk about upside down! Yet, if we are not careful, we can fall into the same trap. Human traditions change, but what we receive from God's word will never change. Let us be careful to make that distinction. Even more, let us always be careful to engage in God's will over our own.