

## LESSON SEVEN

# GOD'S TRUTH VERSUS TRADITION

*[Jesus] continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"*

MARK 7:9



## REFLECTION

Tradition. Habits carved in stone. Familiar patterns of behavior. Traditions almost always have a colorful history, but many who practice traditions faithfully have no idea how and why they started. Traditions often take on the aura of law. What may have been a specific way to express certain core values becomes much less effective if the values have been forgotten. Which of your family traditions would you find difficult to change? Why?

## SITUATION

Jesus' popularity sparked envy and concern among the religious leaders of his time. He was breaking too many rules. His disciples were playing fast and loose with tradition. A huge collection of rules for living had gradually developed that were supposed to reflect the central teaching of God's Word. In fact, many of these turned out to be subtle ways to deflect and contradict God's instructions, as Jesus illustrated in the following episode.

## OBSERVATION

*Read Mark 7:1–23 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.*

## NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus <sup>2</sup> and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup> (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial

washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup> When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

<sup>5</sup> So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?"

<sup>6</sup> He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

"These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.

<sup>7</sup> They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are merely human rules."

<sup>8</sup> You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions."

<sup>9</sup> And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' <sup>11</sup> But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—<sup>12</sup> then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. <sup>13</sup> Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

<sup>14</sup> Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. <sup>15</sup> Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them." [<sup>16</sup>]

<sup>17</sup> After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. <sup>18</sup> "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? <sup>19</sup> For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

<sup>20</sup> He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. <sup>21</sup> For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

## NEW KING JAMES VERSION

<sup>1</sup> Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. <sup>3</sup> For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup> When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.

<sup>5</sup> Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?"

<sup>6</sup> He answered and said to them, "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.

<sup>7</sup> And in vain they worship Me,

Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

<sup>8</sup> For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

<sup>9</sup> He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' <sup>11</sup> But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever

profit you might have received from me is Corban"—' (that is, a gift to God), <sup>12</sup> then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, <sup>13</sup> making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

<sup>14</sup> When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: <sup>15</sup> There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. <sup>16</sup> If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"

<sup>17</sup> When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. <sup>18</sup> So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, <sup>19</sup> because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" <sup>20</sup> And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. <sup>21</sup> For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, <sup>22</sup> thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

## EXPLORATION

**1.** According to Jewish tradition, what did the disciples do wrong? How did the Pharisees point out this error to Jesus?

**2.** What did Jesus find so hypocritical about the Pharisees and their traditions?

3. How did Jesus apply the prophecy in Isaiah to the Pharisees (see verses 6–8)? What point was Jesus making by citing this particular prophecy?

4. What was the meaning of the parable Jesus told (see verses 14–16)?

5. Why didn't the disciples understand the parable?

6. Why do you think it was easier for the Jewish leaders to follow religious rules rather than develop an intimate relationship with God?

## INSPIRATION

Once, when we were leaving for a week-long trip, I remembered I hadn't unplugged my ham radio. I ran back in the house, pulled the plug, and dashed out again. But I pulled the wrong plug. I unplugged the freezer. . . . For seven days, then, a freezer full of food sat in a sweltering apartment with the power off.

When we came home . . . guess who got fingered as the one who had unplugged the freezer—and who therefore would be responsible for cleaning it? You got it. So I got to work.

What is the best way to clean out a rotten interior? I got a rag and a bucket of soapy water and began cleaning the outside of the appliance. I was sure the odor would disappear with a good shine. When I was through, the outside of that freezer could have passed a Marine boot-camp inspection. It was sparkling.

But when I opened the door, that freezer was revolting. . . .

*No problem*, I thought. I knew what to do. *This freezer needs some friends. I'd stink, too, if I had the social life of a machine in a utility room.* So, I threw a party. I invited all the appliances from the neighborhood kitchens. It was hard work, but we filled our apartment with refrigerators, stoves, microwaves, and washing machines. A couple of toasters recognized each other from the appliance store . . . The blenders were the hit, though; they really mixed well.

I was sure the social interaction would cure the inside of my freezer, but I was wrong. I opened it up, and the stink was even worse! Now what?

I had an idea. If a polish job wouldn't do it and social life didn't help, I'd give the freezer some status! I bought a Mercedes sticker and stuck it on the door. I painted a paisley tie down the front. I put a "Save the Whales" bumper sticker on the rear. . . . That freezer was classy. It was stylish. . . . Then I opened the door, expecting to see a clean inside, but what I saw was putrid—a stinky and repulsive interior.

I could think of only one other option. My freezer needed some high-voltage pleasure! . . . I rented some films about foxy appliances. . . . I even tried to get my freezer a date with the Westinghouse next door, but she gave him the cold shoulder. After a few days of supercharged, after-hours entertainment, I opened the door. And I nearly got sick.

I know what you're thinking. The only thing worse than Max's humor is his common sense. Who would concentrate on the outside when the problem is on the inside?

Do you really want to know?

A homemaker battles with depression. What is the solution suggested by some well-meaning friend? Buy a new dress.

A husband is involved in an affair that brings him as much guilt as it does adventure. The solution? Change peer groups. Hang out with people who don't make you feel guilty!

A young professional is plagued with loneliness. His obsession with success has left him with no friends. His boss gives him an idea: Change your style. Get a new haircut. Flash some cash.

Case after case of treating the outside while ignoring the inside—polishing the case while ignoring the interior. And what is the result? . . . Exterior polished; the interior corroding. The outside altered; the inside faltering. One thing is clear: Cosmetic changes are only skin deep.

By now you could write the message of the beatitude. It's a clear one: You change your life by changing your heart. (From *The Applause of Heaven* by Max Lucado.)

## REACTION

7. What traditions do you follow that are a part of your religious heritage?

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8. What are some things that you tend to do in order to “appear” holy?

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9. When are you most likely to uphold outward religious tradition rather than honor God in your heart?

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10. What is wrong with measuring spirituality by outward actions?

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11. How can you make sure traditions and outward actions do not replace true holiness?

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12. What can you do to ensure that you are clean in God's sight?

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## LIFE LESSONS

We know that external behavior and measurements are both highly inaccurate. Appearances deceive as often as they convey the truth. But that's how we tend to judge other people—until it occurs to us that God is neither impressed nor fooled by appearances. God looks on the heart, and he's the expert at cleaning hearts. Being clean in God's sight doesn't mean we are careless about how we look or act; it means that we take steps to make sure that the internal and external aspects of our lives are consistent.

## DEVOTION

*Father God, your Son always knew the line between obeying the letter and the spirit of the law. He gave me a good example to follow. Help me to do that. Guide me into an understanding of your desires that keeps the heart-issues in mind and doesn't get sidetracked about appearances. Develop in me the integrity of a clean heart.*

