

## Wheelersburg Baptist Church 10/17/04 Brad Brandt

### Mark 7:1-13 "Tradition, Tradition!"\*\*

Main Idea: There is a fundamental difference between Christianity and religion. The basic difference pertains to two problems illustrated by a confrontation that occurred between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark 7:1-13.

I. People who love religion have a problem with Jesus (1-5).

A. Religious people tend to love their traditions (1-4).

1. The Pharisees came to Jesus (1).
2. The Pharisees carried baggage (2-4).

B. Religious people tend to impose their traditions on others (5).

1. Tradition isn't necessarily wrong.
2. Tradition can become a dangerous distraction.

II. Jesus has a problem with people who love religion (6-13).

A. He calls them hypocrites (6-8).

1. Their talk sounds good.
2. Their hearts are far from God.
3. Their worship is meaningless.
4. Their teachings are man-made rules.

B. He says they elevate man's ideas over God's Word (9-13).

1. The Lord exposed one example (9-13a).
2. The Lord indicated there are many others (13b).

Application: Ask yourself these important questions...

1. Why do I do what I do?
2. Why do I believe what I believe?
3. Is my authority really God's Word?

In 1903 the Russian Czar noticed a sentry posted for no apparent reason on the Kremlin grounds. Upon inquiry, he discovered that in 1776 Catherine the Great found there the first flower of spring. "Post a sentry here," she commanded, "so that no one tramples that flower under foot!" Some traditions die hard.

Why do we do what we do? That's a critical question.

A very poor holy man lived in a remote part of China. Every day before his time of meditation in order to show his devotion, he put a dish of butter up on the window sill as an offering to God, since food was so scarce. One day his cat came in and ate the butter. To remedy this, he began tying the cat to the bedpost each day before the quiet time. This man was so revered for his piety that others joined him as disciples and worshipped as he did. Generations later, long after the holy man was dead, his followers placed an offering of butter on the window sill during their time of prayer and meditation. Furthermore, each one bought a cat and tied it to the bedpost.

Tradition, tradition! It's so easy to do things *just because*. Just because we've always done it this way. Just because someone told us it's the right way. Just because we feel comfortable doing it this way.

But again, a good question to ask ourselves is, *why do we do what we do?*

Please realize this. There is a fundamental difference between Christianity and religion. The difference has to do with the answer to that question, *why do we do what we do?*

It's a very practical question. If you want your family to be united, you need to be on the same page in answering, *why do we do what we do?* If a work place is to experience unity, the same is true. As for a

church. *Why do we do what we do?*

You say, "So what *should* the answer be?" We'll find out from Jesus this morning. We'll also see a vivid portrayal of the difference between Christianity and mere religion. The basic difference pertains to two problems, both of which surfaced in the confrontation that occurred between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark 7:1-13.

### I. People who love religion have a problem with Jesus (1-5).

Oil and water don't mix. Religion and Jesus don't mix either, although many try. The fact is, people who love religion will have a problem with Jesus, and here's the reason. Such people have two tendencies.

A. Religious people tend to love their traditions (1-4). In verse 1 we meet the Pharisees again, along with the "scribes" or "teachers of the law." It's not the first time. The Pharisees, you'll recall, were the "separated ones" in Judaism (that's what their name means). They were very religious. They were also very uneasy about Jesus.

Back in Mark 2:16 they criticized Jesus for associating with sinners. In 2:18 they confronted Him because His disciples didn't fast and in 2:24 because they picked and ate some grain on the Sabbath. In 2:24 they got upset with Him because He healed a man on the Sabbath. In 3:6 the Pharisees began to plot how they might kill Jesus.

A transition is occurring in Jesus' ministry. He's begun His third and final year of public ministry. The crowds have been thick, but that's changing. In Mark 6 Jesus fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, and consequently, the crowd wanted to make Him king by force (according to John 6). But Jesus declined and preached a message announcing Himself to be the Bread of Life, and saying that only by eating His flesh and drinking His blood could men gain eternal life. That message shattered His popularity, as John records in John 6:66, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

Something else occurred at the same time. While the once curious were leaving Him, His critics came looking for Him. Verse 1 says, "The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus..."

1. *The Pharisees came to Jesus (1)*. Though hard to believe, it's true. Some people hated Jesus, particularly the religious elite. They were both threatened by Him and jealous of Him. He didn't fit into their system. He wasn't one of them. Eventually, in accordance with the decree of God, they chose to eliminate Him, or so they thought.

Here they came to spy on Him. They came to trap Him. And what amazes me is, He let them come near. He didn't shun them. He faced them. He *loved* them, for He had come to save them, too. Even religious sinners need Jesus.

So the Pharisees came to Jesus. Mark makes it clear they didn't come empty-handed.

2. *The Pharisees carried baggage (2-4)*. I don't mean luggage, either. Verse 2—"The Pharisees and some teachers of the law...saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were 'unclean,' that is, unwashed."

The problem isn't dirty hands. The problem is ceremonial cleanness. That's what bugged the Pharisees.

You might be surprised to know there are a lot of God-given rules pertaining to cleansing in the Old Testament. God gave the Israelites a lot of instruction about cleansing. But why? It's because God was teaching Israel an important lesson, that before a sinner can enjoy fellowship with Him that sinner must be

*cleansed.*

Unfortunately, the majority of Jews missed the point. As time passed, they focused on the law and missed the intent of the law. They actually took God's good law and expanded it, adding a host of man-made laws to it.

Mark, who is writing for a Roman audience that would be unfamiliar with Jewish laws, offers a parenthetical explanation in verses 3-4: "(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. 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.)"

Let me give you an example of how tedious these rules were. Barclay explains, "Before every meal, and between each of the courses, the hands had to be washed, and they had to be washed in a certain way... First, the hands were held with finger tips *pointing upwards*; water was poured over them and had to run at least down to the wrist; the minimum amount of water was one quarter of a log, which is equal to one and a half egg-shells full of water. While the hands were still wet each hand had to be cleansed with the fist of the other... This meant that at this stage the hands were wet with water; but that the water was now unclean because it had touched unclean hands. So, next, the hands had to be held with finger tips pointing downwards and water had to be pointed over them in such a way that it began at the wrists and ran off at the finger tips. After all that had been done the hands were clean."

You say, "Well, it does sound a little obsessive-compulsive, but it's not so bad to want clean hands, is it?" It's not about clean hands. In Jewish eyes, if you didn't wash your hands this way, you were considered unclean in the sight of God.

Barclay continues, "A Rabbi who once omitted the ceremony was buried in excommunication. Another Rabbi, imprisoned by the Romans, used the water given to him for handwashing rather than for drinking and in the end nearly perished of thirst, because he was determined to observe the rules of cleanliness rather than satisfy his thirst."

You say, "Well again, it sounds extreme, but a person's entitled to do what he wants to do, isn't he?" The problem is, he doesn't stop with himself. Religious people tend to love their traditions, but that leads to a second tendency.

B. Religious people tend to impose their traditions on others (5). "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 'unclean' hands?'"

Again, the issue is *not* hygiene. The issue is religious ceremony.

The key phrase here is "tradition of the elders." What was the "tradition of the elders?" It refers to the Jewish oral law. God had given His people the Torah, the Old Testament law. These written covenant stipulations were summed up in the Ten Commands. Concerning the law, God said (see Deut 5:33), "Do this and you will live."

Many indeed wanted to please God. In fact, some wanted to please Him so much that they developed guidelines which were intended to help people keep God's law. They handed down these extra-biblical guidelines to their children—the word "tradition" in verse 2 means "a handing down." The Jews passed from one generation to the next this oral law which was based on the Old Testament, until finally it was written down in the Mishnah (in the second century A.D.). In Jesus' day it was still in oral form.

Though the original intent may have been noble, the outcome was enslaving. In essence, the Jews had an

immense system of manmade laws that eventually possessed as much authority, if not more, as did God's Law.

Don't miss this. The criticism that the Jewish leaders leveled against Jesus' disciples had to do with Jewish oral tradition, not Scripture. Before we write off the Jewish leaders as extremists, allow me to remind you that we do the same type of thing. We add guidelines to clarify God's Word so as to help us define and promote godliness.

Here's an example. God's Law says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery (Ex 20:14; the seventh commandment)." That's God's Law, and it's a non-negotiable. Immorality is wrong. Always. Doing anything that would harm a marriage relationship is wrong.

But in order to protect themselves from violation of the seventh commandment, what do some folks do? They create other guidelines intended to serve as a hedge to keep us from violating God's Law. For instance, some say, "I and my family will not practice mixed-swimming (men and women together) since this might promote temptation." And, "We will not have a television in our home, since there are immoral programs on it." And, "Our ladies will not wear shorts in public in order to promote modesty."

Now ponder this question. Is there anything wrong with having these standards? No, in fact, the aspiration is noble. The problem is when we elevate our personal standards and make them equivalent with God's commands. It's one thing to have personal preferences; it's another to treat our preferences as though they came from God and impose them on others as requirements for spirituality (to say I won't have a TV is one thing; to say no good Christian will have a TV is quite another).

Now, plug that into the hand-washing situation. Is there anything inherently wrong with having hand-washing guidelines? No. What's the problem? It's when those guidelines become a test for spirituality. That's what had happened in first century Judaism.

Please don't miss this. The Jews' criticism in verse 2 had *nothing* to do with God's requirements. Jesus taught His disciples to obey God's Law. In fact, He clearly stated in Matthew 5:17, "Think not that I am come to destroy the Law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy but to fulfill." And if there's any question, check out Matthew 5:19, "Whosoever, therefore, shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven."

It is never permissible to disobey God's commands. That's true for disciples of Jesus then and now. Adultery is always wrong. So is drunkenness, homosexuality, gossip, stealing, and every other sin the Scriptures forbid. We must forsake them.

But that wasn't the case with Jesus' disciples. Jesus taught them to obey God's Law. But He didn't require them to keep the man-made, Jewish laws. And that's why the Jewish leaders were suspicious of Him.

So how should a Christian view tradition? We need to keep two things in mind.

1. *Tradition isn't necessarily wrong.* Brett Blair comments, "To those who are argue that tradition can kill a church: The second time you do anything it becomes a tradition." Everyone has traditions. Even the most progressive-minded, seeker-sensitive churches have traditions. A few years ago *Leadership Journal* had a rather insightful cartoon showing a group of people sitting around a boardroom table. The headline read, "Week 2 of a church plant." One person said to the rest of the group, "That's not the way we did it last week."

We are creatures of habit. Traditions are inevitable in all walks of life, even church life. And that's not necessarily bad. Why not learn from the past? One of my favorite lines (I think it comes from Wiersbe) says, "Before you start moving fences, find out why they were put there in the first place." Just because

something's a tradition doesn't mean it's wrong. However...

2. *Tradition can become a dangerous distraction.* No matter how noble the original intent, man-crafted traditions can cause us to lose sight of reality. Ritual becomes a hazardous enemy to true Christianity. We become enamored with externals and miss the heart issues.

Look at the church landscape in America. Go to practically any city and you'll find one if not dozens of dead churches. Enter their doors on a Sunday and you'll find ritual—yes, the machinery is still operating—but something's terribly wrong. What is it? Let's let Jesus Himself tell us as we turn to the second part of the story.

Problem #1: People who love religion have a problem with Jesus. Here's problem #2.

## II. Jesus has a problem with people who love religion (6-13).

Jesus has two things to say to such folks.

A. He calls them hypocrites (6-8). Verse 6—"He [Jesus] replied, 'Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites.' Isaiah lived over seven hundred years before the Pharisees, but Jesus says, 'He had people just like *you* in mind.'" Traditionalism is not a new problem, my friends.

Jesus called his critics hypocrites. What's a hypocrite? By definition, it's a person who play-acts in life. How can you tell if you are a hypocrite? It's not easy, for we're so prone to justify our actions, but Jesus' words warn us to look out for four red flags.

1. *Their talk sounds good.* Verse 6 again, "As it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips.' They say they love God. They say they want to please God. What they say sounds right, even impressive, but something's missing. A second red flag...

2. *Their hearts are far from God.* Isaiah was speaking for God when He hit the nail on the head, "But their hearts are far from me." The religious person puts on an impressive show, but that's all it is, a *show*. His religious machinery keeps churning away, but his heart isn't engaged.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the noted German pastor that Hitler killed, describes this inconsistency, "At this moment God...loses all reality...Satan does not fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God." A hypocrite forgets God.

Can you honestly say that you are near to God? It's so easy to talk the talk, to throw around "religious-words" and impress people. It's also the mark of a hypocrite.

3. *Their worship is meaningless.* Verse 7—"They worship me in vain." Oh, they may work hard at it and they may be quite sincere, but the Lord's assessment is that their worship is empty, a big zero.

One of the prime reasons for this is seen in verse 7—"Their teachings are but rules taught by men." There's the fourth red flag that points to hypocrisy...

4. *Their teachings are man-made rules.* After finishing the Isaiah quotation, Jesus makes it personal in verse 8, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

That's a serious charge, to say they'd turned from God's truth to tradition. But the facts don't lie. The Jewish leaders did view their traditions as a higher authority than God's Word. Rabbi Eleazar said, "He who expounds the Scriptures in opposition to the tradition has no share in the world to come." The *Mishna*, a collection of Jewish traditions in the *Talmud*, records, "It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the

voice of the Rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself."

If we find ourselves at this point starting to condemn our Jewish friends, we would do well to look in the mirror. The bottom line fact is, many of us replace God's truth with something else. For some, it's church tradition. For others, it's what mamma says. For others, it's Freud or Darwin or some other person that keeps us from believing and doing God's Word. For still others, it's simply *us*. We have become the only authority that matters. We do what we want and we believe what we want to believe.

Yes, Jesus has a problem with people who love anything, including religion, more than God. First, He calls them hypocrites. Then He exposes their basic error.

B. He says they elevate man's ideas over God's Word (9-13). A critic might say at this point, "If you're going to call someone a hypocrite, you'd better have some solid evidence." And he would be right. Since this was a strong accusation, Jesus proceeded next to offer proof.

1. *The Lord exposed one example (9-13a)*. "And he said to them: 'You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down...'"

It was known as the practice of "Corban." Corban comes from the Hebrew word meaning "a gift." Warren Wiersbe summarizes (53), "If a Jew wanted to escape some financial responsibilities, he would declare his good to be 'Corban--a gift to God.' This meant he was free from other obligations, such as caring for his parents."

Let that sink in. God clearly said that children are responsible to care for their elderly parents. But the Jews developed a tradition that made it possible for a son to shirk his responsibility. All the son had to do was declare that what he intended to give his father and mother was "Corban," a gift devoted to God, and that gift could no longer go to his parents. Ironically, it could still be used by the son.

Just think of it. People who prided themselves in God's Law actually nullified it. They twisted the Law a full 180 degrees. They turned white into black. They circumvented God's requirements. They rationalized their way right out of obeying God's Law.

Corban is one example of how people have used man-made ideas to nullify God's Word. I wish we could say it was the only example. We can't.

Recently, our jail ministry workers met a fellow in the county jail who opened up about some real problems in his life. They listened and assured him there was hope for him in God's Word. They asked if he would like a Bible. He said he would, so they gave him one. He looked at it and returned it. "I don't want that. It's not the KJV." Think of it. Here's a man who desperately needs God's Word (he's in jail!), but he refused a legitimate translation of God's Word on the basis of someone's opinion he once heard that said that only the KJV is legitimate.

Corban is one example of elevating man's ideas over God's Word, but...

2. *The Lord indicated there are many others (13b)*. Note carefully Jesus' final words in verse 13, "And you do *many things* like that."

Those are sad words, *many things*. And it continues today with example after example of traditions that nullify God's Word.

I don't know how many times I've heard this one. After talking with someone who desperately needs to hear God's Word, I invite them to church, only to hear this response, "Oh, I can't come to church. I don't have the right clothes." Analyze that. Where did they get the notion that you need a certain kind of clothes to go to church? Not from the Bible. It's a tradition of men. And realize what they're saying, "I would rather disobey God and stay away from church than disobey the tradition of men I hold that says you must wear certain clothes in church."

Another example. "I can't become a Christian. I'm not the 'religious' type." Who says you can't? Not God! To say only certain types of people are candidates for the Christian life is a lie from Satan that's promoted through the traditions of men. God's Word says, "Come to me *all* you who are weary...Whoever will call on the Lord shall be saved."

Know this, my friend. Jesus has a problem with people who love religion. He's not impressed with them, no matter how sincere they may be. He calls them hypocrites.

How do you think the Pharisees responded to this? Mark doesn't tell us, but Matthew does. Matthew 15:12 —"Then [right after Jesus finished talking] the disciples came to him and asked, 'Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?'" Jesus *offended* the Pharisees. You say, "It's not a very Christlike thing to offend people." In this case, it's very Christlike. Jesus loved His critics enough to offend them by sharing the only truth that could save their souls.

Then He gave His disciples this instruction concerning the Pharisees in Matthew 15:14, "Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." Yes, try to help a traditionalist if you can, but realize his condition. He is blind. And if he happens to be a teacher, he is a blind guide of others who are blind. Don't try to argue with him. Leave him alone.

Keep in mind that Jesus didn't initiate this confrontation. The Pharisees and scribes did. But He back away from it either. He took the risk to help them and others who were being duped by their traditions. Ultimately, He went to the cross so that they, too, could be set free from their sins, if only they would repent and believe in Him.

"You do many things like that." They needed to hear those words. Perhaps we do, too, more than we might realize.

People who love religion have a problem with Jesus, but Jesus has a problem with people who love religion. It goes both ways.

Barclay tells the story of a Muslim man who was pursuing another man with upraised knife to murder him. Just then the call to prayer rang out. Immediately he stopped, spread out his prayer mat, knelt, said his prayer as fast as he could. Then he got up and took off as fast as he could so he could catch and murder the other man. What was prayer to him? Just a formality, a ritual that made no difference in how he lived his life.

Is your religion any different? A so-called "Christian" businessman runs his business with the same passion the Muslim man exerted in trying to kill another. He neglects his family, takes advantage of his employees by overworking and underpaying them, all because of his love for the dollar. Then Sunday comes, so he stops his greedy pursuit, and goes to church. He sings some songs about loving God, hears a message about loving other people, bows his head in prayer, says 'Amen' at the close of the service, and leaves...intent on changing? No, intent on business as usual in the week to come.

Is there any difference? Or how about the young person who participates in worldly practices all week long, even engaging in sexual promiscuity on Saturday night, but dutifully shows up in church on Sunday morning, again to sing about loving God, to give money, to read Scripture, and to do other "religious" activities.

The problem isn't with the activities—they are good; we *should* go to church, sing, pray, read the Scriptures, and give. The problem is thinking that good actions will cancel out sinful ones. More fundamentally, the problem is thinking that God is impressed with our good works when our hearts are not right with Him and our fellow man. He is not impressed. Frankly, He is incensed.

That's exactly what He told a very religious group of people in Isaiah 1:10-18:

"Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! 'The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?' says the LORD. 'I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats [they were doing lots of religious activities]. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood [they were guilty of social injustice]; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

Let's make it personal...

Application: Ask yourself these important questions...

1. *Why do I do what I do?*
2. *Why do I believe what I believe?*
3. *Is my authority really God's Word?*