

The Word on Worship

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Mark 7:8 *"Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."*

From our position in history, we see how the Pharisee's tradition strangled faith. We dismiss their traditions about the washing of hands as obsessing over the gnats and missing the camels of the faith. But to connect the dots to our lives today, we must realize the honest concerns behind the traditions. The Law required the priests to wash their hands to be ceremonially clean and that standing was required for anyone in their household to eat their share of the sacrifices. The Pharisees' tradition extended this requirement to all Jews. The desire of the Pharisees was to strive for holiness above what the Law prescribed. Since the command of God was *"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."* (Leviticus 19:2), the Pharisees saw purity as essential and it did not stop at the doors of the Temple.

For the Pharisees, the washings belonged to the traditions of Moses and became doctrine. They sought to fill in the gaps by careful analysis of the Law of Moses, as given by God. Their doctrines, which were based on these traditions, were rooted in Scripture and equal in authority in their minds. Their goal was giving practical application of the Law so lay people could live a life of holiness and purity outside of the Temple. A second benefit was protection against the influence of the world around them from watering down Judaism. It made sure people could clearly set themselves apart from the ungodly influences of those who were destined for destruction because of their moral corruption.

Now fast forward 2,000 years to the present. What doctrines have we developed from tradition to fill in the gaps of Scripture to direct what we should do (or not do) to remain holy? Before you scoff and say, I would never be so caught up in rules based on tradition, consider this: Should we tithe gross income or net income (assuming you do)? Does that include the money we get from recycling and credit card reward money? Does it include fruit and vegetables we grow in our home gardens? These are not silly questions. We use a tradition which tries to honor God's requirements and then apply them to guide us in how to respond in situations which are not clearly spelled out in Scripture. Or is our Pharisee moment to emphasize one area of holiness over another to reinforce our being separate from the world? Because we do not engage in "this" sin (usually one which holds no sway over us) we are not like "them" who would never darken the doorway of a church. But what is our response to direct biblical direction regarding lust, anger, covetousness or gluttony? Is our answer, "Well that may be in the Bible, but it is not really for us already in the church"?

Many Christian traditions have direct parallels with the Pharisees' concerns. If things are not done in a certain way, they are perceived to be violations. Whether it is baptism, communion, music style or use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; we must guard against the temptation to focus on the details so much that we miss the grand design of God. Jesus Christ came to make God accessible to everyone. The intent of the Pharisees was to make God accessible to everyone by obedience to the rules of the priests in the Temple, but being in the Temple has nothing to do with access to God. What matters is the righteousness of Jesus Christ which comes from His work on the cross of Calvary – not ours.