

Traditions of Men 2-20-05

Matthew 15:1-20 (NIV)

¹ Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" ³ Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" ⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' ⁵ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' ⁶ he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ⁸ "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

Our story today begins with an attack on Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees and teachers of the law, no doubt upset at Jesus' following, (Matthew 27:18) started pointing at things they could find fault in. They were being critical because of the jealousy in their hearts. They made the trip all the way up to Galilee from Jerusalem to criticize the man they thought was way too unconventional to be so popular. (John 9:27)

The heart of man is amazingly evil. (Ecclesiastes 9:3) In trying to be religious and respectable, man can criticize that which exposes his own weaknesses. Instead of accepting the truth and changing our ways, we often lash out, as if condemning another makes us less guilty or superior to others.

I hear it on an almost daily basis. I'm sure you do too. Why do we ever need to point to another person's flaws or weaknesses? There are rare occasions when it may be necessary to protect someone or to help that person. If you will stop before you utter a critical word and ask yourself if it is helpful to say it or not, you will almost always find it unnecessary to express that criticism. I find numerous instructions in God's word to speak encouraging words (1Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13) and numerous warnings not to slander others. (Titus 3:2; 1Corinthians 6:10; Ephesians 4:31) To slander is to speak reproachfully about another, in other words, critically. This little children's song is one that every Christian should practice. "If you can't say something nice, shhh, say nothing. Take a bit of good advice, shhh, say nothing. Think of friendly things to say, that is what you ought to. When you think an unkind thought, button your lips and swallow. If you can't say something nice, take a bit of good advice and don't say anything at all, just don't say anything at all." (Proverbs 10:19)

It is so basic and yet, so impossible to those who feel the need to prove themselves superior. The religious leaders in Jesus' day made it a lifestyle. They lived to criticize others. (Proverbs 17:4) In the Pharisee's mind, Jesus was an untrained rebel against their traditions, fooling the people with His teaching and supposed miracles. (John 7:47-48) And the disciples were the most unlikely lot. There were fishermen, zealots, and worst of all, a tax collector. Even in our day of tolerance, something similar would

Commented [notes1]: 18 For he knew that for envy they had delivered him.
Matt 27:18 (KJV)

Commented [notes2]: 24 A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."
John 9:24 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 3 This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead.
Ecc 9:3 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.
1 Thess 5:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.
Heb 3:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 2 to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.
Titus 3:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.
1 Cor 6:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.
Eph 4:31 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 19 When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.
Prov 10:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 4 A wicked man listens to evil lips; a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue.
Prov 17:4 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: 47 "You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. 48 "Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him?"
John 7:47-48 (NIV)

cause suspicion. If you made a comparison it might be people like, truck drivers, former militants from the woods of Arizona, and an IRS auditor. Not the kind of men you would first think of as elders for your church because of unjust stereotypes. It would be easy to slander them and find nods of approval. How easily we pass over the heart and condemn some outward appearance. Critical people can readily find someone to agree with them.

That is what the Pharisees were looking for, a point of attack in which the people would agree. Saying these men didn't obey their traditions was stating the obvious, but through it, they were really attacking Jesus. Nothing has changed. When people don't want the restrictions of the Word in their life, to submit to one another, to accept obligations and constraints of the Holy Spirit, they criticize something about the followers. What was happening then is the same that is happening today. We can't criticize Jesus, so to get out of His instructions we criticize His followers. What we need to realize is that criticizing Jesus' followers is criticizing Jesus. (Luke 21:17; Matthew 25:40) If I don't want to go to church and endure the ups and downs of fellowship as He instructed us to, (Hebrews 10:25) I'll criticize the hypocrites that do try to obey. None of them are perfect, so it will be easy for me to find some fault. If I want to exalt my church over another church, I can criticize the people that attend the other church. There is always something about man that can be criticized. When we do that, we merely declare our own self-righteousness. That is what these religious leaders were doing, declaring their own self-righteousness. (Job 9:20)

¹ Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" The specific thing they decided to criticize was the fact that the disciples didn't wash their hands. Now you may think, "How trivial and insignificant!" But the reason they picked this issue was that it was a widely accepted tradition that many of the people followed. It wasn't a moral issue that others might find themselves convicted of as well, but a simple routine that most followed and could therefore easily join in condemning as well. (Luke 16:15)

Today we might find something like wearing a tie to church on Sunday (especially in the South) or bowing your head when you pray. We could teach a lesson on how ignoring these actions would be disrespectful to God. It is easy to conform to the tradition and then look down on those who don't because it is a simple outward action. Every religion of man has its outward ceremonial traditions that do nothing to change the heart or cleanse the mind. (Colossians 2:20-22)

These leaders readily admitted that it was not the law of God but the tradition of the elders that the disciples transgressed. During the preceding 400 years, the scribes had written so much on the interpretation of the Law that there was more interpretation than Scripture. (Deuteronomy 12:32) Gradually, the interpretation superceded the Law in importance. Every detail was spelled out for you. The cleansing of the hands before eating bread required a minimum of half a log of water, about one and a half eggshells worth. First the water was poured over the fingers with the hands pointing up. The water had to be sufficient as to drip from the wrists. Then it was repeated with the fingers pointing down. Each fist was rubbed over the

Commented [notes12]: 17 All men will hate you because of me.
Luke 21:17 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.
Matt 25:40 (KJV)

Commented [notes14]: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.
Heb 10:25 (KJV)

Commented [notes15]: 20 Even if I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me; if I were blameless, it would pronounce me guilty.
Job 9:20 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 15 He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.
Luke 16:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 20 Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules:
21 "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?
22 These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings.
Col 2:20-22 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 32 See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it.
Deut 12:32 (NIV)

other hand. The purpose was not to be sanitary, but to ritually remove spiritual uncleanness. You might have touched a Gentile or a dead body. If you then touched your food, the uncleanness would enter you through the food. Some rabbi even taught that demons attached themselves to your hands and entered your body through the food you ate.

You may think that sounds ridiculous. I do! But imagine if we told them how respectful to God it was to tie a piece of cloth around your neck. The cloth must be doubled in front and be tied in a particular manner. The length of the wider piece should be about to your waist. If you do not do this thing on Sunday, you are not showing proper respect to God. They would say, "That is ridiculous!" Do you see how outward traditions can come to represent something very powerful to people? C.H. Spurgeon, the prince of preachers, attempted to make this point to his congregation by asking them, "How many would still be Christians if there was no 11A.M. service?"

Jesus often answered questions with questions. ³ *Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"* ⁴ *For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'* ⁵ *But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,'* ⁶ *he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.*

First, He tells them that their traditions received from the scribes can contradict, instead of reinforce, the Word of God. The reason for the traditions was to protect the Law. Instead, Jesus was saying, they nullified the Law. If that was true, all the traditions were subject to dismissal, or at least to be put in their place as merely the opinions of men. This was a bold challenge to their accepted ways, and a very clear picture of the hypocrisy in their hearts. The Pharisees so valued these additions that they even taught that God studied them with the departed rabbi.

The fifth commandment requires us to honor our father and mother. That would include helping them with their necessities. Jesus reminded them of this commandment from [Exodus 20:12](#) that they certainly knew by heart. To add to the seriousness of it, He quoted another verse, [Exodus 21:17](#). Anyone who speaks evil of his parents could be put to death. These two commands from God should have given the Jews an idea of how seriously God desires for us to respect our parents, and the seriousness of speaking evil about others.

Money seems to be one of the great temptations throughout time. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were, in many cases, very wealthy. They considered it a sign of God's blessing on their life. At the same time, it affected their judgment on spiritual issues. They had developed a clever way of getting out of supporting their penniless parents. If you dedicated your possessions to God, you did not, even worse, could not use them for your parents. Just like the goods of Jericho, ([Joshua 6:17a](#)) they belonged to the Lord and were for His use only. So far, it kind of makes sense. If I had some silver and had promised it to a Christian ministry and my parents needed it, I'd be in a bind. Which should I do? Keep my vow to God or the commandment to honor my parents?

Commented [notes19]: 12 "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. Ex 20:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: 17 "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death. Ex 21:17 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 17 The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Josh 6:17 (NIV)

The case we are reading about is quite a bit different. They would claim that everything they had was God's. (Leviticus 27:28) Whenever they needed to use it, they would un-dedicate it. When they were done, they would rededicate it again. In this way they could ignore the commandments of God. It was completely sanctioned in the writing of the Scribes. They found a way to ignore God's heart and specific instruction and yet call it spiritual and righteous.

Commented [notes22]: 28 "But nothing that a man owns and devotes to the LORD—whether man or animal or family land—may be sold or redeemed; everything so devoted is most holy to the LORD. Lev 27:28 (NIV)

Jesus had taken their attack, and exposed them for the hypocrites they were. They came to accuse the disciples, but Jesus revealed their wicked ways. His illustration was so clear that they couldn't help but know in their hearts they were guilty. They emphasized the traditions of the elders over the Law. Jesus showed them how this made their religious system meaningless.

⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ⁸ "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." "You actors!" He was saying. Like the Greeks that donned masks to play different roles in a drama, they were wearing a mask of righteousness while underneath they were nullifying the laws of God. Their criticisms were their masks. Brother and sister in Christ, you don't need to wear a mask. You are righteous in Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:21) Being critical declares that you don't understand that in your heart. You don't have to be better than someone else. The word of God tells us to consider others better than ourselves, not to consider ourselves superior to others. (Philippians 2:3)

Commented [notes23]: 21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Cor 5:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Phil 2:3 (NIV)

Jesus was quoting Isaiah 29:13. ⁸ "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. ⁹ They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." How perfectly this passage from Isaiah spoke to their form of religion. Always trying to say righteous words, always with a wrong heart. The right words are important, but the heart is just as important. All the right words with the wrong heart is meaningless worship. We sing the song "Heart of Worship". The song declares that it is all about Jesus. If our lips declare it, but our hearts are after something else, we are singing in vain. If we teach what men think and the latest popular psychology, we are worshipping in vain. That is why we have gone to expository preaching. We want to hear God's instruction, not man's opinion. We want eternal truth not the ever-changing opinions of man.

Isaiah wrote that teaching man's rules was meaningless worship. (Isaiah 29:13) Emphasizing man's rules results in hypocritical religion that has nice words, but an unchanged heart. The truth is twisted around to serve us instead of change us. People drawn by our words are confused by our example. Worst of all, they may reject the right words because of a wrong example. Better to have no religion at all than to turn people away from the truth because of our poor example.

Commented [notes25]: 13 The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. Isaiah 29:13 (NIV)

The real difference between Jesus and His disciples and those who had come to accuse Him, was not style or theology; it was their hearts. (1 Peter 3:5) Jesus and the disciples were humbly seeking the will of the Father, surrendering each day to the Father's direction, speaking what the Father instructed, going where He led.

Commented [notes26]: 4 Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. 1 Peter 3:4 (NIV)

(Hebrews 10:9a) They weren't seeking the respect and honor of men, but the honor that comes from God alone. (John 7:18) The Scribes and Pharisees had come to demand conformity to their manmade rules while their hearts were comfortably fixed in their compromising ways. They were screaming, "Why aren't you conforming! Who do you think you are bucking our rules? We call the shots, and if you don't conform, then we will deal with you!" Jesus wasn't playing their power games. He didn't care about having a title or position given by men. (John 5:41) The security this world offers was meaningless to Him. He had come to obey the Father, and that was in direct contrast with many of their teachings. When it was, He didn't pull His punches or back down; He boldly proclaimed the truth. When tradition contradicted the heart of God, He told them so in no uncertain terms. If we are to be like Jesus, we will do the same. (1 Peter 2:21)

How can we be sure our worship does not become meaningless rules and ritual like that of the Scribes and Pharisees? How can we be sure we are not just mouthing the right words, while our hearts are far from Him? The obvious message in our passage today is that traditions not usurp the word of God. We must always ask ourselves what our motivations are in our actions and words and especially when we are critical. Are they to make us look good, righteous, special, or superior to others? Or are they out of heart that desires to please God? Do we criticize others because they don't conform to our ideas even as we justify our own stubborn rebellion? Are we acting, or is our speech and actions right out of a heart surrendered to God? God is looking for people to worship Him in Spirit and truth. (John 4:23) There is a genuineness about a person who is seeking to please God alone. It stands in stark contrast to those who are seeking personal gain, honor from men, and bending the truth to get it.

There are a number of points on which we could close this message, finances, honoring our parents, or tradition being more important than God's word, but I believe the Spirit is speaking to us about being critical. I'm not suggesting we avoid being honest, but that we examine our hearts before we open our mouths to criticize. Are we speaking in love? (Ephesians 4:15) Are we saying it with the sincere desire to help, or is it because we haven't understood that we have the righteousness of God in Jesus and so seek to make ourselves look good by contrasts? Remember when you speak against a person, they could say something against you as well. When they don't, they are being more gracious than you. And remember that you reap what you sow. (Job 4:8) If you speak ill of someone, don't be surprised if it comes back to you. Before you think I'm addressing someone or some situation, let me reassure you that I'm sharing with you what the Lord is convicting me of. I need to sing that little song more often, and I hope you'll be singing it too. Wouldn't it be a blessed church that was full of members that sang it? (Romans 12:14; Psalm 131:1-2) "If you can't say something nice, say nothing!"

16 May Jesus himself and God our Father, who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts of unending help and confidence, 17 put a fresh heart in you, invigorate your work, enliven your speech. 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 (MSG)

Commented [notes27]: 9 Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will."
Heb 10:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes28]: 18 He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.
John 7:18 (NIV)

Commented [notes29]: 41 "I do not accept praise from men,
John 5:41 (NIV)

Commented [notes30]: 21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.
1 Peter 2:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes31]: 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.
John 4:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes32]: 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.
Eph 4:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes33]: 8 As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it.
Job 4:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes34]: 14 Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.
Romans 12:14 (KJV)

Commented [notes35]: 1 My heart is not proud, O LORD, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.
2 But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.
Psalms 131:1-2 (NIV)