

“ULTIMATE AUTHORITY”
MATTHEW 15:1-9

In the opening scene of *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevya, the main character, compares the people of his conservative Jewish community to fiddlers who are perched precariously on rooftops, and he asks the audience, “Why don’t we fall off? How do we keep our balance?”

Those are great questions. In a world where things are constantly changing, shifting, and shaking—a world where people are so polarized and paranoid, how *do* we keep our balance? In a world where truth is relative, morality is subjective, and history is being revised to conform to present-day political correctness, how do we keep from falling off?

Tevya thinks he knows. He confidently and adamantly answers those questions by declaring, “One word: *Tradition!*”

A lot of people feel like Tevya about tradition, regardless of race or religion. Because history tells us that tradition has often been a sort of glue that keeps communities intact and prevents them from fragmenting. Tradition has often been a ballast that provides stability during turbulent times. And tradition has often been like a collection of keepsakes that rekindles the loyalty and affection for the community’s shared history, values, and beliefs. In other words, traditions can be very beneficial. Traditions can be a powerful and positive force for good.

But traditions are not always benign. They can also be a force for evil, evil that is often disguised as goodness. That is because traditions, even long-standing, well-meaning traditions, can become so sacred to the people who cling to them that they actually become idols. Sometimes people equate manmade traditions with God’s word. They elevate those traditions to the same level of authority as God’s word, and they insist that people who do not follow or obey those traditions are in serious spiritual jeopardy. This has been done frequently throughout history with spiritually debilitating results. It is still being done today with the same results.

For the next couple of weeks, we are going to look at a portion of Scripture where Jesus addresses some people who equated man’s traditions with God’s word, thinking they were pleasing God. He informs them, however, that God was offended. He also tells them that by doing this they were placing themselves in great spiritual peril. As we look at this passage, please note that though his words are addressed to a specific group of people at a specific point in history with a specific set of traditions, the application of these words is just as timely and relevant today as then.

Look at **Matthew 15:1-2**. *Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.”*

Don’t forget, Jesus’ relationships with the religious leaders in *Galilee* were already strained. Offended by His teaching and jealous of His popularity, they looked for every opportunity to discredit or silence Him. So, they accused Him of playing fast and loose with their precious rules, and, hoping to drive a nail in the coffin, they accused Him of being demon-possessed.

However, their efforts did not achieve the kind of results they hoped for, so they sent for the big guns, the Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. These were the premier scholars of Judaism who had more education, clout, and authority, and who would, presumably, be the most qualified to match wits with the wily Nazarene and bring an end to His popularity and influence.

They began by asking Jesus a question related to the “tradition of the elders.” Please note that the origin of this “tradition” was noble and useful. Devout Jews who did not want to repeat the dismal moral history of their ancestors were very careful about keeping the law. “They saw the law as God’s greatest gift to the human race and regarded it as a wonderful privilege that the Jews, the people of God, had received it” (Morris, PNTC). They also wanted to honor and obey every single commandment in the law, so they studied it diligently.

The fruit of their diligent study was a vast, detailed collection of traditions that were orally transmitted for generations and finally written and preserved in two books—the Mishna and the Talmud. *Today* we call such writings commentaries, which can be valuable tools for Bible students and scholars. They can shed light on difficult to interpret passages or give guidance on how a passage might be applied.

But over the years, through the contributions of many rabbis, each with varying degrees of insight and wisdom, these commentaries grew larger and larger until they consisted of several volumes of fastidious rules, regulations, and dogma. Some, like the Pharisees, loved it! For them adherence to these rules was like a game. The stricter, more strenuous, more tedious, and more time consuming the rules, the better.

But the Pharisees thought everyone should play this game; in fact, they *insisted* that everyone play it. Only *they* did not view it as a game. By the first century the Pharisees had elevated man’s commentaries on God’s law (traditions), to a place where they had equal authority to God’s law.

That is the historical context for the question that the Pharisees and scribes posed to Jesus in verse 2. They said, ² *“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.”*

Trust me, though the Pharisees are technically complaining about the handwashing habits of Jesus’ disciples, they are really leveling their complaint against Him. In those days, a student’s behavior reflected the instruction of His teacher. They knew that if the disciples were not following the rules about handwashing that Jesus was somehow behind it.

The particular tradition that provoked the ire of the Pharisees concerned the issue handwashing before meals. This practice had nothing to do with personal hygiene, but with the removal of *ceremonial* uncleanness. The original law about handwashing, found in Exodus 30, was written to priests who served in the tabernacle. The law prescribed that they had to wash their hands (and feet) before doing certain sacred tasks (30:17–21). Again, this was a ceremonial cleansing to symbolically remove any defilement.

But gradually, the teachers of the law decided that this law ought to be applied to *everyone* in the Jewish community, not just to priests serving in the tabernacle. They had discerned that in the course of daily life anyone could inadvertently touch something that was “unclean” and, therefore, become ceremonial defiled. And they deduced that if one touches something that is unclean, his hands become unclean, and if his unclean hands touch food, the food becomes unclean. And when he eats food that is unclean, his whole body becomes unclean.

So, to prevent this dreadful condition, the teachers of the law developed an elaborate ritual of washing that “removed” defilement, and they practiced it scrupulously before eating. So important was this matter that a whole section of the Mishnah, called “Hands,” is devoted to it.

Jesus’ disciples did not follow these rules, and the Pharisees could not understand why. They demanded to know why Jesus’ disciples were not following these traditions.

Jesus' response to their demand is interesting. Instead of directly answering their question, He asks a question of His own. **Verse 3**, *He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"*

The Pharisees and scribes would have liked nothing more than for Jesus to take the bait and begin arguing with them, for they prided themselves on their skill and proficiency in theological debate. But Jesus did not take the bait. Instead of answering their question about the tradition of handwashing, He immediately called their attention to the fundamental flaw in their reasoning.

In verse 3 Jesus compares and contrasts "the tradition of the elders" with "the commandments of God." By emphasizing *God's* commandments and *your* traditions, He points out that they obviously do not have the same level of authority. *God's* commandments trump *your* traditions, and I'm pretty sure they would have agreed with Him on this point.

But Jesus also accuses them of breaking God's commandments for the sake of their tradition. And He wants them to consider which is worse, to break a manmade tradition, like the disciples did by not washing their hands before eating, or to break God's commandment?

To drive the point home, Jesus gives an example of how the Pharisees did this in real life. **Verses 4-6.** *⁴For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'* *⁵But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God,"* *⁶he need not honor his father.' So, for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.*

Again, Jesus compares and contrasts God's commandments with manmade tradition. The first commandment is one of the ten commandments, "*Honor your father and mother*" (Ex. 20:12). The second is an application of that commandment. "Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die" (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9). There is nothing controversial about these commandments. They are easy to understand, and it is easy to discern how to apply them. Furthermore, every Jew would agree that these commandments were binding, and that it was a serious matter to break them.

But after quoting these commandments Jesus goes on to quote one of the Pharisees pet traditions that contradicted them. Notice He starts verse 5 with the words, "But *you* say..." which is an intentional contrast to the beginning of verse 4 which says, "For God commanded..." **Verse 5.** *"But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God...""*

This tradition, known as *Corban*, was the practice of pledging one's personal wealth to the temple to be paid upon one's death. It seems like a thoughtful, generous practice. However, the tradition was written in a way that cunning people could actually use it for self-serving ends. That's because funds that were pledged to the temple could not be transferred to anyone else while one was still alive. However, they could still be used for one's own benefit.

So, suppose a man named Jacob went to town to buy a car and came across a friend who was in a bad way and asked for financial help. If Jacob had previously made this pledge, he could just say "Corban" to his friend, and the friend would know that not only was Jacob not obligated to help him, he *couldn't* help him, because all his funds were already pledged to God and the temple. So, Jacob could continue on his merry way to the dealership, buy a car for himself with those pledged funds, and drive it home with a clear conscience.

That was also true if Jacob visited his parents and discovered they needed some financial assistance for medicine and home repairs. He could say, "Sorry, mom and dad, but Corban!" And they were supposed to understand that not only was their son not obligated

to help them, he couldn't. All his resources had already been pledged to God and the temple, though on his way home from his folks Jacob could buy a second car with those pledged funds and drive it home with a clear conscience.

Corban was a common, convenient practice among the Pharisees who loved to be perceived as spiritual. But Jesus declares that such a practice is a sinister way of breaking God's commandments. The necessary application of God's command to honor one's father and mother is to take care of them when they have needs, and by practicing the man-made tradition of Corban one was nullifying that command. Look at **verse 6**. ***6 [You say] he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.***

The word translated "made void" means "nullify" or to "invalidate the authority of." Jesus is saying that when someone observes a man-made tradition that contradicts a command of God, he is rendering the word of God null and void. That is true even if that tradition is well-meaning, even if its original intent was good. Traditions are man-made. That means they can be fallible. That means they are not binding. That means they are subject to the authority of Scripture and as such they ought to be scrutinized and evaluated in the light of Scripture.

The Pharisees should have known better because they *did* know the Scriptures. So, they should have been able to evaluate Corban in light of the sixth commandment and conclude that Corban contradicted it. And they should have been guided by the hermeneutical principle that God's commandments trump man's commentaries.

But either they did *not* know, or, more likely, they saw it as a legal loophole that enabled them to play fast and loose with the rules in order to serve their own selfish interests. Whatever the case, Jesus issues a stunning indictment in **verses 7-9**. ***You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said:***

***8 "This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;***

***9 in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."***

Hypocrites" is an appropriate word, since the Pharisees had come to Jesus pretending to be concerned about how His disciples flouted the traditions that they deemed binding, yet they (the Pharisees) used some of those very traditions to flout the word of God for their own selfish interests.

Jesus compares the Pharisees and scribes to Isaiah's contemporaries who similarly flouted the word of God. These were people who honored God with their lips but whose hearts were far from Him. In other words, they said all the right things, and they said them correctly, perhaps even enthusiastically. But God is not impressed with mere outward professions. What really matters to Him is the condition of the heart.

They were also like Isaiah's contemporaries in that they worshiped God in vain, and they treated the commandments of men as doctrines. In other words, they performed the religious rites and rituals, but they were simply going through the motions, and were void of genuine, heartfelt devotion. That lack of heartfelt devotion compelled them to be sloppy in their teaching. Instead of diligently teaching the commands in Scriptures that are authored by God, they taught manmade rules and insisted that people follow them as though they were divine commands. And it resulted in spiritual bankruptcy.

Sound familiar? This was precisely what the Pharisees were doing in Jesus' day, with the same results. They were promoting the traditions of the elders as doctrine, hoping, as Tevya believed, that the traditions would keep them from falling off the roof, hoping that those

traditions would unite them, stabilize them, and keep them centered.

But Jesus says, "not so." That is something only the Scriptures can do. There is no substitute for Scripture, and there is nothing that man has said, no matter how well-intentioned or well-written, that is even on the same scale in terms of weight or authority.

I told you earlier that even though Jesus was addressing a specific group of people (the Pharisees and scribes) at a specific point in history (the first century) with a specific set of traditions (the Mishnah and Talmud), His words are just as timely and relevant today as then.

Some of us have come from strict religious backgrounds or churches where traditions have been promoted as doctrines and have carried just as much weight, perhaps even more, than Scripture. No doubt, most of those traditions started out as well-intentioned applications of Scripture, but over time they devolved into binding commands that became the basis for determining one's spiritual maturity or devotion.

When you grow up in a church that does this, it is easy to become confused. If those man-made traditions have been pounded into you from birth, and you've been told that some of them are required for salvation, it is difficult to distinguish between those traditions and God's commandments.

So, I want to close this message by stating two important principles regarding tradition, and then showing how we can apply them. First, we must know how to distinguish between traditions and Scripture, and never allow traditions to trump Scripture.

When someone says something like, "This is what Christians are supposed to do..." or "Good Christians do such and such..." or "if you don't do such and such you're not saved..." you shouldn't necessarily take his word for it. Find out the source of his authority. If he says that it comes from Scripture, look it up and see if it really does, and, if it does, whether he interpreted it correctly.

By the way, the only written resource we have that is completely authoritative is Scripture. Sermons, commentaries, and any other interpretations of Scripture are manmade, and are therefore inferior to Scripture and subject to Scripture. That goes for the Pope, your pastor, your favorite Bible teacher, your church constitution or policy manual, and your spiritual habits.

For example, even though I think it is a really good idea to read the Bible every day and spend time praying every day, if I were to say to you, "You must read the Bible and pray every day in order to please God or in order to grow in your faith," ask me to prove it from Scripture. I couldn't prove it, because the Bible makes no such statements. When the Bible was written no one owned their own copy of the Scriptures, and most of the population was illiterate. Was God displeased with them? No! Did it mean they couldn't grow in their faith? No!

Likewise, if I was to say to you that a church cannot be a church unless they open up a building every Sunday morning where the congregation can gather to worship and sing songs and pray and hear a sermon, ask me to prove it! I couldn't, because nowhere in the New Testament is church described as a Sunday morning service that meets in a designated building. Nor does the New Testament talk about formal church membership in a local church. Nor does it talk about what instruments to use or not use during worship gatherings, or the kind of clothes to wear to those gatherings, or whether the pastor should wear a tie when he preaches. Yet many of these things have become traditions that some people elevate and make binding.

We must know how to distinguish between manmade traditions and the word of God,

and the only way to do that is to know what the Word of God says.

Second, we ought to enjoy and observe traditions without being ruled by them. There is definitely a place for tradition. I love our Sunday morning services, and I cannot wait until we get back to our normal ways of meeting and fellowshiping and worshiping. It's perfectly okay to enjoy and observe that tradition. But we must not be ruled by it. The church can gather in any number of ways and venues and days of the week and worship and pray and teach in a variety of styles and methods. Scripture *does* mandate that every believer be part of a local church. It *doesn't* mandate what the gatherings look like.

Likewise, I have a tradition of reading my Bible every morning first thing after I wake up. I have done it consistently for forty-four years. I enjoy it. I get a lot out of it. But I shouldn't insist that my wife do it (even though she does), or that my kids do it (even though they do). I could recommend it as a helpful habit or practice, but there is nothing in Scripture that mandates daily Bible reading.

I could go on. There is a place for tradition. Traditions can certainly be beneficial. But they are not binding. They might help us keep our balance. Then again, they might make us lose our balance. The only thing that is truly reliable to keep us from falling is Scripture.

Ultimate Authority

Matthew 15:1-9

Main Idea: *Religious traditions can divert devout people from the path of obedience to God's word*

The scribes accuse Jesus' disciples of breaking tradition (1-2)

The "spiritual elite" from Jerusalem

The "critical danger" of unwashed hands

Jesus accuses the scribes of breaking God's commands (3-9)

The accusation: breaking God's law by following tradition (3)

An example (4-6a)

The biblical command to honor father and mother

The tradition that trumps and voids the command

The indictment (6b-9)

They have voided the word of God (6b)

They are hypocrites (7a-9)

Heartless lip service

Vain worship

Application

We must distinguish between man's traditions and God's laws

We must never let tradition trump God's word

