

TRADITIONS VS. COMMANDS

In Mark chapter 7, the Pharisees and some of the scribes criticize the disciples of Jesus for not following the traditions of the elders in the ceremonial washing of hands before they ate. Jesus' response points to a larger issue of the relationship between human traditions and the commands of God.

While human traditions can provide a way for us to fulfill God's commands (for instance, the tradition of meeting on Wednesday evenings provides us another opportunity to assemble with the saints for the purpose of exhorting one another and stirring up love and good works, per Hebrews 10:24-25), traditions must always be kept in their proper context and understanding. In His response to the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus indicates two ways in which traditions can become problematic.

Traditions are problematic when they are taught as the commands of God. The complaint against the disciples of Jesus was concerning their lack of ceremonial washing before they ate, a tradition of the elders. Mark tells us, "*they found fault*" with the disciples (Mark 7:2). Jesus called this fault-finding hypocritical (Mark 7:6a). He then applied to those finding fault the following quote from the prophet Isaiah: "*This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*" (Mark 7:6b-7). Worship of God is in vain (to no effect) when the traditions of men are taught as the doctrine of God. When traditions are elevated to and bound as law, those doing so put themselves in the place of God, for "*there is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and destroy*" (James 4:12).

Traditions are also problematic when they are used to violate or avoid God's commands. Continuing in His rebuke, Jesus said to them, "*All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition*" (Mark 7:9). He goes on to give an example of one of the ways in which they used their traditions to violate God's commands (vv. 10-13). They had a tradition of setting their money aside for God (sounds like a good thing, right?), but in so doing, they then had nothing left over to help provide for their parents, thus directly violating God's command to "*honor your father and mother*" (Exod. 20:12). Following their tradition actually caused them to violate God's law.

We must be extremely careful when it comes to our traditions. Any tradition that becomes elevated to law and/or causes us to violate God's commands must be put away. Let us seek to serve God in accordance with His will and without hypocrisy. Let us seek to serve God with a heart that is truly turned to the Lord.

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