

Learn From Jesus

The Power of Tradition

In Australia, we call people from New Zealand “Kiwis.” They have a distinctive accent so that to our ears, if they say “fish and chips,” it sounds like “fush and chups.”

So a Kiwi went into a fish and chip shop and said, “\$5 worth of fush and chups please.” The guy serving him said, “You’re a Kiwi, mate.” “Yeah, how’d you know?” asked the Kiwi. “It’s the accent, mate. Gives you away every time.” He went home and practised saying, “Fish and chips”. A month later he went back to the fish and chip shop and said, “\$5 worth of fush and chups please.” Again, the man behind the counter observed, “You’re a Kiwi, mate.” “Yeah, how’d you know?” “It’s the accent, mate. Gives you away every time.” He went home and practised again. Another month went by and he went back to the fish and chip shop and said, “\$5 worth of fish and chips please.” “You’re a Kiwi, mate.” “Yeah, how’d you know?” “The fish and chip shop closed three weeks ago. This is a stationery store.”

Easy to get into a habit, isn’t it?

One time I reached for the deodorant where I always put it. I sprayed, but the smell was really wrong. I thought, “What’s that?” Then I looked and saw that it was fly spray! My wife had put it there and the tin was designed very similar to the deodorant.

Habit again. At least I don’t get fleas in my armpits anymore!

A tradition is like a habit.

Matthew 15:1-20

Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, “Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” He answered and said to them, “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, ‘Honour your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God’ – then he need not honour his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: *‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honour Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’*” When He had called the multitude to *Himself*, He said to them, “Hear and understand: Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.” Then His disciples came and said to Him, “Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” But He answered and said, “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.” Then Peter answered and said to Him, “Explain this parable to us.” So Jesus said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

This message is from the series *Learn From Jesus*, and I’ve entitled it *The Power of Tradition*.

1. The problem

To understand what was going on here, we need to understand some background.

The problem begins with the Pharisees, religious leaders who were always trying to trap Jesus into saying something wrong.

So, on this occasion they come to Him with an accusation against His disciples.

And it's not that His disciples have broken any of God's commandments, but that they have departed from the tradition of the elders.

What had happened was that over a period of hundreds of years, the various rabbis had taken the Scriptures (God's Word) and developed a multitude of man-made rules so that people could be sure that they were doing the right thing.

One of rules included the need to ceremonially clean (as opposed to unclean) before you ate food.

They required you to wash your hands before you ate.

Not to kill germs, but it was a ritual.

They believed it was easy to become unclean.

Anywhere a Gentile walked was unclean and if you touched that ground, you were unclean too.

And since Jesus and His disciples hung around with prostitutes, tax collectors, adulterers etc., they would be considered unclean.

They of all people should wash.

Here's an example of how this worked.

They kept water jars to be used before a meal. The least amount of water they could use was 1½ eggshells worth.

The water was poured over both hands with the fingers pointed upwards. The water had to run up to the wrist and it had to drop off from there because the water was now unclean because it had touched unclean hands.

If the water ran back down onto the fingers, the fingers would become unclean again, because they touched unclean water.

Perfect for people who are OCD!

Then the hands were turned the other way and the process repeated.

Next, the fist of one hand would rub the other hand.

A strict Jew – like the Pharisees and scribes – would not only do this before the meal but between each course.

I can't imagine why the disciples weren't into this!

This is just one example. Imagine living a life governed by so many complex rules and regulations.

But this was the kind of tradition that the religious leaders expected everyone to live by even though God Himself had never required it.

Traditions aren't necessarily bad of themselves.

We have national traditions, like in America, they have Thanksgiving to give thanks for the harvest and the previous year.

In Australia, we have ANZAC Day, Christmas and Easter.

We can have family traditions like Christmas stockings.

Churches have traditions too. E.g. the way we do communion.

Some traditions are good: they strengthen relationships, reinforce identity, help form good habits, remind us of important values.

Like communion.

Some traditions are neutral, neither good nor bad.

Like the way we do communion as opposed to the way the church down the road does it.

Some traditions have a shelf life.

They start for a good reason, but we hold on to them past their shelf life.

For instance, many in the Salvation Army are questioning why they still don't celebrate communion at all.

There's a story of a sentry standing day after day at his post for no apparent reason. One day, a passer-by asked him why he stood in that particular place. "I don't know," the sentry replied, "I'm just following orders." The passer-by then went to the captain of the guard and asked him why the sentry was posted in that place. "I don't know," the captain replied. "We're just following orders." So the captain of the guard went to the king: "Why do we post a sentry at that particular spot?" he asked. But the king didn't know either. So he called for his wise men and asked them. The answer came back that a hundred years earlier, Catherine the Great had planted a rosebush and had ordered a sentry placed there to protect it. The rosebush had been dead for eighty years. Catherine the Great was dead too, but the sentry still stood guard.

Isn't it true that the church sometimes sets something in place – which originally serves a good purpose – and a couple of centuries later, we're still doing it, and nobody even knows the reason why? It's past its use-by date.

But don't you even think of trying to change it!

This leads us on to...

2. Jesus' response

Jesus was no shrinking violet.

There was no way He would be intimidated by the religious leaders.

Sure there are good traditions; and there are traditions that are neither good nor bad.

But when tradition leads people into bondage; when it puts their lives in chains; when it directly contradicts what God says, then there's a problem.

And this is what Jesus is confronting.

Matthew 15:3-6

He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, 'Honour your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, 'Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God' - then he need not honour his father or mother.' Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition."

Jesus goes back to the Ten Commandments: 'Honour your father and your mother.'

In the New Testament, Paul points out that it's first commandment with a promise.

The first four of the Ten Commandments deal with our responsibilities towards God.

So this is the first of the Ten to deal with our responsibilities and attitudes towards people.

Because our attitudes towards our parents set a foundation in our lives.

When the Bible talks about showing honour, it's very often linked to the responsibility of providing for material needs.

For instance, in 1 Tim 5 where it talks about honouring elders and widows, it's talking about meeting their material needs.

In Rom 13:7, showing honour is linked to paying taxes and customs.

So the Jews understood that this commandment meant that they had a responsibility to provide for their parents in their old age.

Especially in a day when there was no social security, no pension, no superannuation.

Children were their superannuation; and it's still like that in many parts of world. Ever wonder why in poor countries they have so many kids?

But never underestimate the ability of human nature to figure out a way to get out of a responsibility.

A man was visiting his friend in hospital, a seriously ill lawyer. He found him sitting up in bed frantically leafing through the Bible. "What are you doing?" asked the friend. The lawyer replied, "Looking for loopholes."

And this is what the Jews did. They figured out a loophole.

This is how they did it: they dedicated all that they had to God. This was called "corban."

They could still use that property for their own personal use, but they could no longer lawfully use it for the support of their aged parents.

So a man is prospering, enjoying life and his aged parents come round and say, "Son, we really need your help. We've got nothing left."

"Oh, I'm sorry," their son replies. "I've dedicated it to the Lord. Wish I could help but, hey, what can I do?"

"See ya!"

Callous, cold-hearted and calculated.

It was one of the traditions of the elders that enabled them to do that.

And pretty much what Jesus was saying was, "In effect, what you have done is undermined God's commandment by your tradition."

So in a case like that, the traditions of man, all man-made rules, trump what God says.

Let's take a look at the nature of traditions.

3. Traditions are often man-made rules

The traditions Jesus is talking about are man-made rules.

They aren't from God.

That doesn't automatically make them wrong, but it does if they contradict God's Word, or bind people, or stop serving a purpose.

For instance, you might ask, "Do you want to have a Christmas Day service, or a Good Friday service?" And I say, "I don't care." "What?!" you reply, in horror.

Listen to this:

Romans 14:1-7

Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.

Paul is saying that some things are a matter of personal conviction and if it is just a matter of personal conviction, then we have no right to put it on someone else.

The last thing we need is a bunch of man-made rules being given equal standing with God's Word.

There's nothing in Scripture about celebrating Christmas or Easter. So is it good or bad?

If you believe that you should celebrate Easter in a special way, that's fine. You just can't put that on someone else.

And herein lies the problem with man-made rules; they are so often used as a weapon to control someone else. A pastor said to me, "I believe a pastor should wear a tie to church; it honours God."

And that's fine for him. If he thinks that, then that's what he should do.

But he can't put that on someone else and expect them to live by it; that's his own tradition.

4. Traditions deal with externals

All traditions – good and bad – deal with externals.

Things like ceremonial washing; wearing a tie; celebrating one day over another.

But truth deals with the heart and remember, the heart is what God looks at.

Matthew 15:7-9

Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

Jesus calls them hypocrites.

The Greek word refers to masks actors wore in theatre, pretending to be something they weren't.

The religious leaders were pretending to be holy by keeping all the man-made rules, but not actually doing what God had said to do.

Then Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honour Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

Here's the problem: when people start to live according to man-made rules instead of God's Word, it's evidence that their hearts have turned from God.

And it's the heart that really counts.

Matthew 15:16-20

So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

What are the important things in this life?

Are they the externals focused on in our society?

The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the car we drive?

Is life about pleasing God with man-made rules?

Not according to Jesus; it's about dealing with issues of the heart and being people of truth, purity, love and grace.

Traditions can be fine, but if they contradict what God says, then they have to go.

And if the Bible is silent on something, we can't turn our own convictions into absolutes.

Let's make certain that the way we live comes from His word, not just our own thinking.