

Let me set the scene for you. Jesus had been doing some amazing things:

- teaching
- healing
- He'd fed the 5000
- Walked on water
- He was full of grace – full of mercy – full of truth
- And yet He was challenging – He challenged everyone to repent of their sin,;
- and He was opening up the way to God – not just for the super-religious, but for ordinary men and women, boys and girls – He was drawing them near to God...

And understandably, His fame was increasing and beginning to spread, throughout the land. And of course, the stories would have been buzzing around Jerusalem as well –being the religious capital and all. And so 'head office' decides to send in the heavies to check-out this young up-start and see that He's towing the line.

And with all these amazing things that Jesus has been doing – and all the amazing teaching that He's been giving, these religious heavies, turn up from head office, and wanted to know one thing:... “Why don't your disciples wash their hands before they eat?”... ☺

You'd think they were talking to pre-school kids.

Imagine, coming face to face with the creator of the universe.. You have an opportunity to talk with him about any topic that comes to your mind... What would **you** ask Him??? Well, I certainly know I wouldn't be asking Him – I wouldn't be

asking Him about personal hygiene.... How foolish did they look???

But you know what? We can be just as foolish, and just as hard-hearted as these religious heavies from ‘head office’... Every time we place on someone, a burden (that isn’t in the bible)... – a burden, that is a teaching of man making it more difficult to follow Christ, we do exactly the same thing... Every time we put up a barrier, which is based on a religious tradition – every time we begin to teach the teaching of men, instead of God’s word, we’re doing exactly the same thing...

And it doesn’t matter what branch of the church you come from, all churches have their own religious traditions – things you do or don’t do, that are **not** commandments of God, but the commandments of men... And we’re not immune from them here...

So, let’s have a look at this reading, and see what Jesus rejected, about the traditions of the Pharisees and Scribes...

They asked Him: “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.”

Let me tell you, there was a lot more at stake here than simple personal hygiene. Do you see what they were doing? They were appealing to the authority of the elders – (The hierarchy of religion, if you like)... And to their traditions.

The Scribes and the Pharisees, were fastidious about keeping the Law, and so they tried to define it to the nth degree, and “build a fence” around it, so they would know exactly what they had to do in every situation...

In Jesus' day, it was just verbal teaching, but about 300 years later, they wrote it down, and the Mishna comes to about 800 pages, and then there were commentaries to explain the Mishna.....

And all of these were **not** God's Law – they were merely man's explanation and interpretation of it... But they began to teach these **traditions**, as if they **were** God's law... And in some cases, their traditions – their teachings – their doctrines, would actually over-ride God's law.

So, here's the example from today's reading...

From Scripture, they knew that God is a Holy God. From Scripture, they knew that for the priests to come into the very presence of God, they had to go through a complex cleansing ritual, to prepare themselves, to encounter the almighty...

So, they knew these things... But how could they – **ordinary** men and women (not priests) – how could **they** please God? Well, maybe they should be clean too?????.... And so, with the very best of intentions, they began a tradition of washing their hands before they eat. And in doing so, it became a religious requirement.

One entire tractate of the Mishna, Yadaim, deals with “hands” (i.e., yādayim), specifying such details as how much water must be used for effective ceremonial purification: e.g.,

“If a man poured water over the one hand with a single rinsing, his hand is clean; but if over both hands with a single rinsing, R. Meir declares them unclean unless he pours over them a quarter-log or more” (M Yadaim 2:1).

And it was **these** sorts of traditions, that they were picking up Jesus' disciples on.

But then Jesus came back at them... **Your** traditions – my disciples break **your** traditions... Well, for the sake of your traditions, **you** break **God's** law... And He gave them an example:

The 5th commandment is to honour your parents. Now that implies looking after them, if they need help – especially as they enter old age...

But one of their traditions, is what they called *Korban*. And *Korban*, was dedicating something you owned, to God. Sounds alright, doesn't it??? Yeah, if you have a pure heart, that is alright... But they didn't have pure hearts, and it was being misused...

If a man had property, he could declare it *Korban*, *dedicated to God, and therefore unavailable to his parents. This convenient declaration apparently left the property actually still at the disposal of the one who made the vow, but deprived his parents of any right to it*¹.

(sort of like putting something in a trust today...)

And of course, Jesus exposed the ludicrous nature of some of their traditions, and their sometimes, incompatibility with God's law...

Traditions don't make you pure. What goes into your mouth, doesn't make you clean or unclean – it's what comes out of it... Your mouth is the overflow of your heart... An evil heart is what makes someone unclean... A pure heart – a righteous heart, is what makes someone clean...

You can do all the ritual hand washing you like, but it's not going to make one skerrick of difference to your heart ... You can dedicate every bit of your property to God, but if it's done to spite your parents... well you've got a very dirty heart...

Jesus said:

So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

⁸ " 'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;

What a dreadful indictment... May that never be said of us here:

⁸ " 'This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me;

May our hearts be close to God.

Showy religion, doesn't cut it... dedicated religious observance, doesn't cut it...

Honouring God with your lips, is in vain... God doesn't **want** your lip-service... God wants your heart, and then He'll have

your lips as well... There's nothing wrong with praising God – as long as it's done in truth...

Through the prophet Isaiah, God said:

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

- *It's not so common today, but in some churches, dancing was forbidden.*
- *As I grew up, I had some friends who were not allowed to even play on a Sunday – because that was too much like work.*
- *Some denominations forbid having a television in the house (but a wireless is OK).*
- *Some churches have strict rules over who can or cannot take or distribute communion.*
- *Church might have a dress-code, so if someone turns up in shorts and thongs, they're frowned upon...*
- *In some churches, the only musical instrument allowed, is an organ*
- *And drums (of course) are forbidden, because 'they're satanic'*
- *Or maybe hymns are never played, because "we only want to appeal to the young people"*

These sorts of things, are all religious rules, made up by men. They are taught as something that **must** be done, or things that must **not** be done – rules that must be kept – , but they're not even in God's word.. They are traditions of men – not requirements of God... And you could probably share with me, half a dozen examples that you've come across in your

life – where rules of men, have been a burden and a barrier to Christians, and particularly new Christians...

Beware of traditions. Traditions are powerful things. They can be good or they can be bad... They might start out as good – with good intentions... But then they become an ungodly rule... Beware of traditions....

Do something for the first time ever in a church, and it's new, and probably not accepted.

Do it a second time, and people start to get used to it.

But be careful of ever doing it a third time, because you are in danger of it becoming a tradition you'll never get rid of.

But it's not only making up **new** rules that Jesus rejected – He also rejected “**doing away** with the commandments of God – and putting aside biblical teaching, in order to satisfy **human** ideas about God:

“Doctrine”, is what we believe. A “doctrine” is a belief, or a teaching that a church holds as true. There are good doctrines and bad doctrines. So, we have a doctrine of grace – that's a good doctrine – we believe in, and teach about the grace of God. ... Alright, so a doctrine is a believe that is held and taught...

For a doctrine to be a good doctrine, it must hold firm to biblical teaching. A doctrine becomes bad, when it does away with the commandments of God, and puts aside biblical teaching, in order to satisfy **human** ideas about God:

- Doctrines formed off of a person's theology (their thinking about God) rather than the word of God, have no place in the church.
 - Doctrines formed by social concern
 - Doctrines formed by feelings, or life experience
 - Doctrines devised, to make the Christian message more appealing to an increasingly Godless society
- if any of these doctrines put aside clear Biblical teaching – they have no place in the church, and they are precisely the sorts of teachings that Christ rejected in the law of the religious heavies from head office...

Jesus said:

...out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person.

If any doctrine be taught, that promotes or allows any of these things, you can be sure of one thing – that doctrine is not from God – it is from the pit of hell... and that's where it should return...

My heart cannot be trusted to devise doctrine... my heart – a human, sinful heart, should **not** be shaping doctrine – it should be shaped **by** doctrine...

Our hearts, need to be shaped by **good** doctrine based on God's word... We don't shape God's word by the cravings of our hearts (because they can't be relied upon)....

To many people in our society, a message like this is deeply offensive... -

“Who are you to tell me what I should or should not believe???”

- Well, you can believe what you like – but that doesn't make it true...
- You can believe what you like, but you cannot claim that it is the doctrine of the church...
- You can believe what you like, but all that makes you, is a blind guide...

A lot of liberal theology today, is the blind leading the blind. People making up their own ideas about God – people making up their own rules and guidelines to live by (based on psychology, science, environmentalism, humanitarianism)... And we just see it more and more, arising in the institutional church...

My prayer, is that we would be a people who's hearts are close to God.

My prayer, is that we would follow and believe and teach, 'sound doctrine', based on God's word. And you won't know God's word, unless you're reading the bible... You won't be able to recognise sound doctrine, unless you study God's word... And I'd be bold enough to say, "You'll only love sound doctrine, if you love God's word."

And my prayer, is that we would never create and devise rules / regulations / traditions, that create barriers between people and God – barriers that God never put there.

That's my prayer

Draw near to God, Love His Word, Hold true to good
Doctrine, and never create human barriers...

Questions:

ⁱ France, R.T., 1985. *Matthew: an introduction and commentary*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.