

Keeping the Traditions

# Traditions

- Often viewed in a negative light
  - Seen as 'old-fashioned', 'backwards', even 'toxic'
  - Believed to be opposed to any sort of change
- Sometimes used as an excuse to avoid critical thinking
  - "We've always done it this way"
  - "If it was good enough for my parents..."
- Religious effects
  - Following tradition instead of God
  - Dismissing commands as 'tradition'
  - 'Traditional' vs 'contemporary'

# Keeping the Traditions

## I. 'Traditions of the elders'

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Hedge around the law

- Mark 7:1-4

- <sup>1</sup> Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. <sup>3</sup> For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup> When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches.

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Hedge around the law
  - Mark 7:1-4
    - Mark details examples of the Pharisees' traditions:
      - Ritual handwashing (“in a special way”) before eating
      - Handwashing after coming from the marketplace
      - Special ways of washing cups and dishes and the like
      - Special ways of cleaning even furniture

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Hedge around the law
  - Mark 7:1-4
  - Pirkei Avot 1:1
    - Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah.
  - Goal is to stop at the railing rather than off the mountain

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Hedge around the law
  - Mark 7:1-4
  - Pirkei Avot 1:1
  - Sotah 4b
    - Rabbi Zerika says that Rabbi Elazar says: Anyone who treats the ritual of washing hands with contempt is uprooted from the world. Rav Ḥiyya bar Ashi says that Rav says: With regard to the first water, i.e., the water used when washing one's hands before a meal, one must raise his hands upward after washing. . . One who washes his hands before a meal must raise his hands upward after washing, lest the water advance past the joint onto the part of the hands that he was not required to wash, becoming impure, and then return to the area he had washed, rendering his hands ritually impure.

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Hedge around the law
  - Mark 7:1-4
  - Pirkei Avot 1:1
  - Sotah 4b
  - Chullin 105a
    - First waters and final waters are an obligation, whereas middle waters are optional. For first waters, one may wash either by spilling the water into a vessel or onto the ground. But for final waters, one washes only by pouring the water into a vessel.



# I. Traditions of the elders

- Mark 7:5
  - Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?”
- Accusation of disregarding ‘authoritative’ teaching
  - **Not** about cleanliness, entirely about ritual purity
  - Disregarding handwashing was viewed as worthy of divine punishment

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Nothing wrong with handwashing
  - Matthew 23:2-4
    - The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.
  - Jesus encourages His followers to listen to the Pharisees' teachings when it comes from the law
    - "Do as they say, not as they do"
    - Pharisees condemned not for teaching but for binding burdens on others they would not carry

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Jesus's response
  - Mark 7:6-8
    - <sup>6</sup> He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. <sup>7</sup> And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ <sup>8</sup> For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.”
    - Jesus emphasizes that these ritual washings are man-made traditions, and merely put on a show of piety

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Jesus's response
  - Mark 7:9-13
    - <sup>9</sup> He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.  
<sup>10</sup> For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.'  
<sup>11</sup> But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban" —' (that is, a gift to God),  
<sup>12</sup> then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother,  
<sup>13</sup> making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do."

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Jesus's response
  - Mark 7:9-13
  - *Corban*
    - Jewish tradition
    - Declaring certain goods or possessions as a 'gift to God'
    - Those possessions could not be used for anything else
      - Vow of 'Corban' overruled other obligations
  - Pharisees *should* have rebuked a person for such a vow
    - Instead they *enforced* it— "you no longer let him"
    - Pharisees, not God, decided that the vow came first

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Jesus's response
  - Mark 7:14-16
    - <sup>14</sup> When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand: <sup>15</sup> There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man. <sup>16</sup> If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"
  - Jesus returns to the problem at hand
    - Are His disciples guilty of making themselves impure?
    - Jesus's answer: No!
      - Thoughts and actions are what defile, not hand cleanliness

# I. Traditions of the elders

- Jesus doesn't condemn the action, but the heart
  - Traditions aren't universally bad
  - Binding human traditions as divine command *is*
  - Acts 5:29
    - But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men."
  - Colossians 2:8
    - Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.
- Any human tradition that contradicts God's law, or that is used to accuse another of sin, is itself sinful

# Keeping the Traditions

- I. 'Traditions of the elders'
- II. **'Traditions of the apostles'**



## II. Traditions of the apostles

- Paul writes positively of traditions
  - 2 Thessalonians 2:15
    - Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.
  - 2 Thessalonians 3:6
    - But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.
- Paul refers to his teaching as ‘the traditions’
  - Rabbis taught how to carry out the law
  - Apostles taught how to carry out the law
    - Key difference is source!

## II. Traditions of the apostles

- Paul's traditions
  - Galatians 1:11-12
    - <sup>11</sup> But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. <sup>12</sup> For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.
    - Paul received his knowledge from Jesus directly, not from men – anything he teaches comes from God

## II. Traditions of the apostles

- Paul's traditions
  - Galatians 1:11-12
  - 1 Thessalonians 2:13
    - For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.
    - Paul passes along the same thing he received: the word of God, not the word of men

## II. Traditions of the apostles

- Paul's traditions
  - Galatians 1:11-12
  - 1 Thessalonians 2:13
  - 1 Corinthians 11:1-2
    - <sup>1</sup> Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. <sup>2</sup> Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you.
  - Paul's teachings and actions are a guide for us to follow
    - Direct commands and an approved example

# Keeping the Traditions

- I. 'Traditions of the elders'
- II. 'Traditions of the apostles'
- III. Modern application**

### III. Modern application

- Possible conclusions
  - “Apostolic tradition”
    - Claim that ‘by word’ in 2 Thess. 2:15 indicates traditions *in addition to* what was written in the epistles
    - Traditions passed down from apostles to early church
      - Feasts and holidays
      - Special observances
      - Rites and rituals
    - Requires extra-Biblical sources
      - Writings of the ‘early church fathers’
      - Spiritual leaders
      - Councils and conventions
    - ‘From God’, thus binding on all followers

### III. Modern application

- Possible conclusions
  - “Apostolic tradition”
    - Found nowhere in Scripture
    - ‘in word’ refers to what Paul has taught in person and aligns with what was written
    - 2 Timothy 3:16-17
      - <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
      - If it’s a ‘good work’, Scripture can equip us
      - If Scripture can’t equip us, it’s not a ‘good work’
  - Renders the apostles no different than the Jewish rabbis

### III. Modern application

- Possible conclusions
  - “Apostolic tradition”
  - “No tradition”
    - Traditions are stagnating and prohibit growth
    - Focus always becomes the tradition and not God
    - Change is essential and should be embraced
      - Must remain relevant—*contemporary*
      - Keep with the times!



### III. Modern application

- Possible conclusions
  - “Apostolic tradition”
  - “No tradition”
    - Tends to appeal to personal desire
    - There’s a reason things are done a certain way
    - Change for the sake of change is disruptive
    - Even new things will eventually become a tradition

### III. Modern application

- What does God want?
  - What we do ought to be evaluated
    - Easy to go through the motions
    - It's rarely 'always' been done this or that way
    - Not immune to fence-building or even adding to the Word
  - Traditions exist for a reason
    - Authoritative commands
    - Aids to carry out commands
  - Evaluation requires caution
    - Careful not to change for the sake of change
    - Careful not to resist change for the sake of resisting

### III. Modern application

- What does God want?
  - Where is the *source* of the tradition?
    - If from God, then not up for discussion!
    - If from man . . .
      - Does it contradict God's word?
      - Does it bind where God doesn't bind?
      - Does it remove the focus from God?
  - What *spiritual benefit* does it provide?
  - What is the *motivation*?
- Not an exhaustive list – many things to consider!