Lesson Eight
The Religious Leaders: Bound By Tradition

**Focal Text**
Mark 7:1-23

**Background**
Mark 7:1-23

**Main Idea**
The religious leaders needed the radically free approach of Jesus to true relationship with God, for their carefully keeping their traditions wasn’t working.

**Question to Explore**
What traditions keep us from entering and living fully in a relationship with God?

**Quick Read**
God wants to be Lord of our lives, not just our religious activities.

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**Commentary**
Recently I had an enlightening conversation with a young couple regarding their faith. They had no interest in church as they understood it. “It’s just a business,” she explained. “They just want your money,” he added. They both told stories of people they knew who went to services every Sunday but were immoral during the week. When I explained Jesus’ desire to forgive their sins and become their Lord, explaining that this experience constitutes a *Christian* in the Bible, they both told me they’d never heard that explanation before. And they grew up in Texas.
So many Americans confuse religion with relationship. They think a Christian is a person who believes in God and goes to church. Tragically, many Christians think the same way. We define spirituality by time spent on a church campus, and assume we are right with the Lord if we attend services and give money.

The temptation to substitute a religion about God for a relationship with God goes back to the ancient Greeks, who placed offerings on the altars of the gods so the gods would answer their prayers. Going to church on Sunday so God will bless us on Monday—praying to start the day so God will bless the day—giving money so God will bless our money—all such transactional religion falls far short of the transforming relationship Jesus wants us to experience.

This week we’ll watch our Lord deal with the Pharisees. Their story is in the text so it does not become ours.

**Beware becoming a Pharisee (7:1-13)**

In lesson seven we left Jesus in Nazareth, where his hometown rejected his divinity and ministry (Mark 6:1-6). Mark then reports about the ministry tour of Jesus’ disciples (6:6-13), Herod’s decision to behead John the Baptist (6:14-29), Jesus’ ministry to the 5,000 (6:30-44), his miraculous ability to walk on the Sea of Galilee to his frightened disciples (6:45-52, to be studied in our next lesson), and his healing ministry in the area (6:53-56).

The enemy was not pleased with such remarkable Kingdom advance and responded by using one of the most religious groups in human history to confront Jesus. Our text begins: “The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus” (7:1). “Pharisees” (Pharisaioi) and “teachers of the law” (grammateon, or scribes, experts in the law) from Jerusalem made the ninety-mile trek north to deal with the growing popularity of this itinerant rabbi (see Matthew 15:1).

They “gathered” (synago, or came together, brought themselves around) Jesus; we can picture them outnumbering him, clamoring for his attention, perhaps even threatening him with their numbers. Jesus had already confronted them regarding outcasts (2:15-17), fasting (2:18-22), and Sabbath observance (2:23-28). As a result, they “went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus” (3:6). Why were they so opposed to our Lord?

**A story of misguided sincerity**

“Pharisee” translates the Hebrew parash, meaning to separate. The Pharisees were so named because they had separated themselves from ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the law as they understood it. They felt themselves superior to the am haarec, the common people, as when they condemned “this mob that knows nothing of the law” (John 7:49). There were never more than 6,000 of them in Israel; theirs was a closed
society that called each other habherim (meaning neighbors) and looked down on everyone else.

Their movement did not begin with such a sanctimonious spirit. It apparently arose during the time of Jewish independence (167-163 B.C.) in support of Judas Maccabeus, their revolutionary leader. We might think of them as the Puritans of their day. When Judas Maccabeus began cooperating with the Romans, however, they separated from him (and apparently received their name at this time). They refused to support the Empire when it came to dominate their nation, beginning in 63 B.C.

Josephus, the first-century Jewish history (himself a Pharisee), describes their theology:

Now, for the Pharisees, they live meanly, and despise delicacies in diet; and they follow the conduct of reason; and what that prescribes to them as good for them they do; and they think they ought earnestly to strive to observe reason’s dictates for practice. They also pay a respect to such as are in years; nor are they so bold as to contradict them in any thing which they have introduced; and when they determine that all things are done by fate, they do not take away the freedom from men of acting as they think fit; since their notion is, that it hath pleased God to make a temperament, whereby what he wills is done, but so that the will of man can act virtuously or viciously. They also believe that souls have an immortal rigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again; on account of which doctrines they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people; and whatsoever they do about Divine worship, prayers, and sacrifices, they perform them according to their direction; insomuch that the cities give great attestations to them on account of their entire virtuous conduct, both in the actions of their lives and their discourses also (Antiquities 18:1:3).¹

Acts records that “the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all” (Acts 23:8). As they waited for a Messiah to liberate their nation, they committed themselves in complete devotion to the law. They were devoted to the oral law, those rabbinic traditions that had grown up to explain and protect the biblical law, a fact that brought them into conflict with Jesus.

To explain: over time the Jewish authorities had developed the haggada, or expositions of the written law, and halacha, rules that served as a “fence” around the written law and were used to enforce it. The Pharisees attributed these traditions to Moses and considered them as binding as the written law. As an example, to protect the Sabbath they defined thirty-nine categories of labor.
What began as a sincere movement to purify the nation and obey the biblical law became a self-righteous, prideful religious sect. They viewed themselves as more righteous than others (Luke 18:11-12) and made a public show of their religiosity (Matthew 23:5-7). Jesus’ rejection of their legal traditions led them to oppose and eventually conspire to kill him.

**A conflict over religious tradition**

On this occasion, their opposition to Jesus began when they “saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were ‘unclean,’ that is, unwashed” (Mark 7:2). “Unclean” translates koinais, or common, defiled. Their hands were ritually unclean because they were “unwashed” (aniptois, or not washed, referring to the ceremonial washing of their tradition). The Pharisees’ concern was not with hygiene, but with ritual purity.

Mark explained for his Roman readers: “(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles)” (7:3-4). Before eating a meal, they would hold one hand pointing up in the air and then pour water on the fingers. When it ran down to the wrist, they turned their hand downward so that the water would drop from their fingers to the ground. The water pots at the wedding in Cana (John 2:6) were provided for just this ceremonial purpose.

They used a similar ritual to cleanse their cooking and eating utensils. “They observe many other traditions” could be translated literally, other things many there are which they received to hold. None of this was prescribed or even mentioned in Moses’ law. While “unclean” vessels were to be rejected (Leviticus 15:12), the law made no mention of “unclean” hands. This ceremony was all done in public and was obviously for show, not for spiritual cleansing.

Jesus and his followers had no interest in such ritualistic piety, “so the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, ‘Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with “unclean” hands?’” (Mark 7:5). They “asked” (eperotosin, or interrogated) Jesus on this matter.

What they called “the tradition of the elders” (parodosin presbyteron) Jesus considered to be deceptive religiosity: “He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men’” (7:6-7). Isaiah was “right” (kalos, or appropriate, commendable, accurate) when he prophesied about these “hypocrites” (hypokriton, referring to an actor wearing two masks, a pretender) in Isaiah 29:13:
The Lord says:

“These people come near to me with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
Their worship of me
is made up only of rules taught by men.”

By quoting their most esteemed prophet, Jesus gave the Pharisees clear and abundant opportunity to see that their rituals had not pleased God but had in fact led them away from God. His rejection of their traditions was not arbitrary but biblical.

Jesus’ refusal to follow their misguided religion was chosen in obedience to the guidance of Scripture: “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men” (Mark 7:8). They had “let go” (aphentes, or sent away, cancelled, departed from) the commands and laws of God and were “holding on to” (krateite, or seizing, keeping) the traditions made by men. No other conclusion could be drawn from Isaiah’s warning.

Rituals that harm all who practice them

Jesus was deeply offended by such ritualistic hypocrisy: “And he said to them: ‘You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!’” (7:9). They had a “fine way” (kalos, or commendable) of “setting aside” (atheteite, or ignoring, nullifying, declaring invalid) the commands of God so they could “observe” (stesete, or bring forward, enforce, uphold) their own “traditions” (paradosin). His sarcasm was intended to make the point as clearly and forcefully as possible.

Here is an example: “For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death’” (7:10). These commandments were articulated clearly in Exodus 20:12 and 21:17. However, the Pharisees had created a way to disobey them while appearing righteous: “But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother” (Mark 7:11-12).

“Corban” transliterates a Hebrew term for gift. The Pharisees decided that the support they should have given their parents could be dedicated instead to God. However, they also decided that they could continue to use these resources until their death, at which time they would be turned over to the temple. (A “reserved life estate” is a similar provision today, whereby a donor continues to use his or her house or other possessions until death, at which time they are given to the specified recipient.)
This legal loophole enabled the Pharisees to retain support they should have given their parents while appearing religiously righteous at the same time. In so doing, they disobeyed the direct command of Scripture to “honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 5:16; see Lev. 20:9).

Jesus’ conclusion was both clear and warranted: “Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that” (Mark 7:13). They “nullify” (akyrountes, or make void, invalidate) the clear word of God by the human tradition they had “handed down” (paredokate, or delivered, instructed). Furthermore, they formulated “many” (polys, or a great number of) similar traditions.

To follow the Pharisees’ tradition of “Corban” today, we might keep a car we should give our parents, deed it to our church, and then drive it until we die. We might keep possessions we should sell so as to give the proceeds to our parents, commit them to the church, and use them to our death. We might designate our investments to be given to the church at our death, and then live off their interest rather than giving it to our parents.

Most in your class are probably not tempted by such ungodly religiosity. But this episode is in Mark’s Gospel because its principles still apply to our lives, no matter how different our culture is from theirs. Are there other ways that your religious commitments serve you rather than honoring God and helping others? Do you give time to church commitments that should be spent with your family? Are you so busy with church programs that you are not engaged in the lives of those outside your congregation? Do your financial commitments to your church preclude generosity to your family or others who would not benefit from your congregation’s programs?

In short, are you tempted to use religion for yourself rather than to advance the Kingdom? So am I. The Pharisee within must be refused with constant vigilance. Where is this temptation especially attractive to you today?

Choose true righteousness (7:14-23)
Jesus, the Master Teacher, was always sensitive to opportunities for Kingdom instruction. On this occasion he turned from the Pharisees to the people gathered around him: “Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, ‘Listen to me, everyone, and understand this’” (Mark 7:14). He “called” (proskalesamenos, or summoned, gathered to himself) the crowd and said, “Listen to me” (akousate, or grant me a hearing, pay attention to what I’m about to say), “everyone” (pantes, meaning all of you), and “understand” (synete, or comprehend) what he was about to say.
Here was Jesus’ life principle: “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean’” (Mark 7:15). “Nothing” (oudeis, or no one, absolutely nothing) a person eats can render him or her ritually unclean. To the contrary, it is what “comes out” (ekporeuomena, or proceeds out) of him that makes him unclean. His words and actions were far more important to God than his diet. The Jerusalem council would later apply this teaching to the Gentiles in absolving them of kosher dietary requirements (Acts 15:24-29).

Later Jesus explained his statement: “After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable” (Mark 7:17). The “house” was probably Peter’s home in Capernaum (see 9:28, 33; 10:10). His disciples asked about his statement, for it contradicted so clearly the traditions of their day.

Jesus’ response was immediate: “‘Are you so dull?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him “unclean”?’” (7:18). “Dull” is an unfortunate translation of asynetois, better rendered in this context as without understanding. Do you not understand? would be a better translation and would not convey a sense of insult. (We will study Jesus’ question more fully in lesson nine.)

Why did food not make a person unclean? “For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body” (Mark 7:19a). “Heart” (kardian) is the center of the will, emotions, and intellect. Food cannot enter or change this central, essential nature of the person. Mark added this note of explanation for his Gentile readers: “(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’)” (7:19b). Jesus literally cleansed all foods.

Jesus continued, “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean’” (7:20). What a person says and does demonstrates character and relationship with God. Jesus then gave his disciples two vice lists. The first six prohibitions are in the plural and point to sinful actions. The other six are in the singular and point to a sinful attitude.

Sinful actions are prohibited first: “For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice” (7:21-22a):

- “sexual immorality” (porneia) describes sexual indulgence, usually by those who are unmarried
- “theft” (kleptes, from which we get kleptomaniac): a dishonorable thief (the word was used for Judas in John 12:6)
- “murder” (phonois): the deliberate taking of a life, not in self-defense or in punishment for a capital offense
- “adultery” (moicheiai): sexual sins committed by those who are married
- “greed” (pleonexiai, or covetousness): the desire to have more, even at the expense of others
- “malice” (poneriai, or baseness, maliciousness): active evil or the desire to harm
A sinful attitude is prohibited as well: “deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly” (7:22b):

- “deceit” (dolos, or treachery): the word originally meant bait and was used to refer to a mousetrap
- “lewdness” (aselgeia, or self-abandonment): unrestrained sinful living
- “envy” (poneros, meaning wicked, evil, the evil one): literally an evil eye in the Greek, a Hebrew expression for being jealous of others and holding a grudge against them (see Deut. 15:9)
- “slander” (blasphemia, or denigration): an attitude that judges and accuses unfairly
- “arrogance” (hyperephania, or pride, haughtiness): unjustified pride in oneself
- “folly” (aphrosyne, or foolishness, lack of sense): the lack of true wisdom; foolish or senseless behavior

Jesus summarized: “All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’” (Mark 7:23). He called such attitudes “evils” (ponera, or coming from the evil one). They come from “inside” (esothen, referring to the inner being) and defile a person in God’s eyes.

How many of these vices would we be able to identify in the actions and words of the Pharisees? Jesus’ teachings made clear the Pharisees’ distance from God, proving that their rituals had not produced righteousness. Before we condemn the Pharisees, however, we should ask: How many of these sins does the Lord find in us?

**Conclusion**

Transactional religion is as tempting today as it was twenty centuries ago. Transformational relationship is as needed today as ever. To choose the latter, you might examine your motives for teaching your class. Do you fulfill this ministry only to advance the Kingdom and equip God’s people for service (Ephesians 4:11-12), or is there a latent temptation to impress your class and earn the favor of God? If this lure does not tempt you, I would think that you are decidedly in the minority. I must ask the same question of myself as I write these commentaries each week.

To apply Jesus’ vice lists more specifically to your life, I suggest a discipline called the spiritual inventory. Take a sheet of paper and pen, and get alone with the Lord for a few minutes. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind anything in your life that displeases God, and write down what comes to your thoughts. No one else will see this paper, and so you can be honest and specific. Then confess these sins, separately and with a repentant heart, claim your Father’s forgiving grace (1 John 1:9), and throw away the paper.
The first time I did this, I was shocked at some of the sins that the Spirit brought to my attention. I now need to conduct this inventory regularly, and commend it to you.

The point of our study is simple: Jesus wants to be King of our hearts, not just our religious activities. There’s room for only one person on the throne of our lives. Because we are fallen people, our default position—our regular position—is to sit on that throne ourselves. Every day we must make the conscious decision to enthrone our Savior as our King.

Would Jesus say he is King of your life today?

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