Grace Baptist Church Dr. Rick Griffith

18 February 1996 (morning of Chinese New Year Eve) Single Message

NIV 35 Minutes

**Traditions that Kill: When Rite Becomes Wrong**

*Mark 7:1-13*

**Topic:** Legalism

**Subject:** Don’t put tradition over Scripture

**Complement:** because this is sin.

**Purpose:** The listeners will “loosen up” from requiring extra-biblical practices of others and avoid traditions which are anti-biblical (such as some Chinese New Year rites).

**Introduction**

1. Sing-ying-kwai-lah! Maybe I better just say “Happy New Year!” It’s that festive time of the year again that we all love—don’t we? (Arouse interest)

2. At least we all love many of the traditions that go with Lunar New Year—time off from work, time with family, new clothes, and especially the food—now I *know* we all love to eat in true Singapore style!

3. But for Christians, this time of the year brings with it a host of questions too—questions regarding traditions. Which are OK and which are not OK for believers? (Raise curiosity)

a. Must all the jars in your house be full by tomorrow morning?

b. Is today really the last day you can sweep your house?

c. Should young people stay up all night on the first day of the new year?

d. And don’t break things the next few days—especially cups and saucers?

e. Can Christians put sugar cane behind the door and light candles?

f. How about something as innocent as presenting a pair of mandarin oranges to a host?

4. I must admit, I found it humorous that today’s message, “Traditions that Kill,” was assigned to a *westerner* to preach on the day before this auspicious holiday. This may be where even angels dare to tread! Yet when I worried about whether I’d be saying the wrong thing, I was comforted by a few things.

a. First, maybe you’ll still forgive me for being a westerner—especially since we have our own superstitious traditions that have been part of our culture for years—like all of these which bring bad luck: don’t walk under a ladder, don’t allow a black cat to cross in front of you, don’t step on cracks in the sidewalk, and breaking a mirror will lead to seven years of bad luck.

b. I also felt comforted to preach today because if I just stick to the text of Scripture, I ought to be in good shape.

c. Third, there are many good things to say about traditions (answer initial objections).

1) Traditions have a way of bonding us together. After all, we do call it the “reunion dinner,” don’t we? My family has a good tradition in this regard: we eat breakfast and dinner together every day as a family. My family also has a tradition of eating pizza in front of the TV every Sunday night. This is the only time we allow the TV on during meals, but we do call it “family devotions”!

2) Traditions also remind us not to forget our past. Susan and I have a tradition of trying to make a short cassette tape every wedding anniversary, reminding ourselves of God’s goodness over the past year. We also have a Swedish smorgasbord every Christmas eve to remind us of our Swedish heritage.

5. I’ll say up front today that many traditions—and by “traditions” I mean practices the Bible does not address—many are not wrong. But they can be—so when are traditions wrong? (subject) When do they “kill”? When does a “rite become wrong”? That’s spelled R-I-T-E.

6. That’s the issue Jesus addresses in Mark 7. Verses 1-8 of Mark 7 show us the first example of when traditions are wrong… (intro to MPI)

**I. Traditions are wrong when they are required of others.**

 Some practices become so much a part of us that we wrongly impose them on others.

 Note, for example, how…

A. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for requiring ceremonial hand washing of others (1-8).

1. Notice how these leaders had a hawk eye on Jesus in verses 1-2…

a. Interesting, isn’t it, that these religious policemen had traveled all the way from Jerusalem to the Galilee where Jesus was—a four-day trip! A careful reading of verse 1 notes that it was the scribes who had made this long trip. Pharisees lived throughout the land, but the scribes clustered around the temple area. But they had traveled long dusty roads…

b. Why? They are gathering around Jesus as investigators to see if He trips up on any of their traditions. Apparently, He doesn’t, but they notice that some of the disciples break one of their traditions of washing the hands.

c. Perhaps as we read this text, you thought, “Mom always told me to wash before supper, but maybe these rough-neck-country-bumkin-disciples didn’t know better.”

2. No, it’s not that they didn’t wash at all. It’s that they didn’t use the “proper procedure” which Mark begins to explain in verses 3-4…

a. Even today the Holy land Hotel in Jerusalem has an interesting sink in front of the dining room. It has a large area to wash, including a huge metal cup with two handles on it. This is for the orthodox Jews to wash their hands properly just before entering the dining room for a meal. The tradition prescribes that the washing must go down to the elbows, and that the last bit of water must fall off the elbow. It’s a bit like what orthopedic surgeon Dr. Tan Chong Tien does to prepare for surgery!

b. This procedure came about originally from Exodus 30:19, where the priests were required to wash their hands and feet before entering the tabernacle. It was a sticky maneuver, for the priest had to have flowing water cover both his hands and feet at the same time! [demonstrate] Lane, 245

c. In the centuries following, this law for the priests at the tabernacle gradually became expected of *everyone at every meal!* Bab. Talmud *Sotah* 4b; Shabbath 62b

d. The Pharisees had evidently successfully convinced the masses that flowing water was the proper method, for Mark says this was the custom of “all the Jews”! In fact, Mark seems to say with a bit of sarcasm that the religious leaders had all kinds of traditions relating to vessels. The rabbi’s traditions recorded in the Mishnah has 45 pages of laws relating to which pots, cups, and utensils are proper—if they have a chip on them, or they have been repaired, or what materials are allowed, or if a cockroach was in the oven with them, etc. Danby, 604-49

e. Certainly, the disciples knew of this tradition, but their association with Jesus had freed them from this addition to the law. Maybe they just dipped their hands into a bowl to clean them, so the Pharisees could easily observe this “free spirit.”

3. So, since Jesus is the “boss,” verse 5 reports that…

4. In response, Jesus notes that traditions are wrong when we impose our own rules on others (6-8).

a. His first example of legalism is a biblical quote from Isaiah of people whose own rules are more important than God’s rules.

b. The Pharisees gave “lip service” to the God who requires “heart service” (6)!

c. How is their worship in vain? It is more concerned with following man-made “rules of worship” than anything else—make sure your head is covered, make sure you stand at the right time, and make sure the women are kept separate from the men.

d. It’s not that Jesus was against tradition. It was that He was against tradition taking such a high place that it usurped God’s very commands, as noted in verse 8.

(So, do you get the setting? Maybe another way to explain this is to note how…)

B. We also have our traditions which we hold so dear we impose them on others. Maybe they don’t relate so much to washing, but they are just as strong in other areas—like what we say.

1. I’m so glad this church doesn’t require us to always say after every Scripture reading, “May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word.” Once I read the Scripture text at a church but didn’t say this. I’ll never forget the look on the song leader’s face as he got up to lead the hymn. You see, I hadn’t said, “May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word” and this man was terrified! So, he quickly said it himself: “May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word,” sighed in relief, then lead the hymn! I thought that God’s Word had inherent authority without the need to pronounce a blessing on it!

2. Another tradition is requiring those who pray to end, “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

a. Did you know that this phrase is not found in the Bible? Yes, we are commanded to ask in Christ’s name, but must we use this as a formula?

b. Another time as a pastor I was counseling a family in crisis. I encouraged them all to pray together, and the young middle-age daughter, unaccustomed to prayer, prayed like this: “Hello? God? Hi, this is Jan. We’re having a tough time in this family right now so can you please send some extra angels to help? Thanks, bye!” Do you see how traditional we get in our prayer language? That prayer was a breath of fresh air to me—and to God too!

3. We impose traditions relating to dress too. I thought about not wearing a tie this morning just to test you whether you too think that what’s on the outside is most important!

4. Now Jesus Himself followed some man-made traditions—but He never *required* them.

a. He attended synagogue, even though this was never commanded of God.

b. He probably even covered his head when praying so as not to give offense.

c. He also attended the Feast of Dedication in John 10:22, which was never commanded by God. But Jesus never said that Jews *must* do these things as the OT didn’t command them.

5. I suspect Jesus doesn’t have a problem with many of our traditions we consider optional.

a. I don’t feel that Christ is displeased when we celebrate Christmas or Easter, even though they not commanded in Scripture. Last December in Jerusalem an elderly, godly, Jewish Christian told our tour group, “We messianic Jews don’t celebrate Christmas since it’s not biblical.” I was shocked—and then I realized that I, a Gentile, was being more of a Jewish Pharisee, than this man, a Jew!

b. I don’t think it’s wrong to close your eyes during prayer, even though this is not biblical either.

6. But what does Jesus think of our *requiring* certain extra-biblical practices?

a. What if we make the celebration of Christmas an issue of spirituality? God would be displeased.

b. What if we feel that the offering must be followed by a doxology? There’s nothing wrong with having a doxology, but there’s also nothing wrong with *not* having it. No text says, “Thou shalt sing a doxology after collecting the offering.”

c. Do some people really get bent out of shape to have the order of service changed? Must the bulletin always look the same each week? Must we even have a bulletin?

d. I thank God He’s allowed me to serve in two established institutions in Singapore: Singapore Bible College, which is 44 years old, and Grace Baptist Church, which is 37 years old. There are real advantages in being a part of ministries which have a rich heritage of faithfulness to God.

e. But I’ve also learned something in my ministry experience: older institutions are generally slower to change because they are rich in tradition. I really pitied one of my students who is going on the staff of a church in Singapore which is over 100 years old! He has had great difficulty with the famous last seven words of a dying church: “We never did it that way before!”

(So, when do traditions become wrong? Verses 1-8 have shown us that traditions are wrong when they are imposed on others. Christ taught in verses 9-13 a second time when traditions are bad…)

**II. Traditions are wrong when they contradict Scripture.**

 **[When man-made practices** go against **biblical teaching, it’s** sin**.]**

A. The specific example here concerns the Pharisees’ practice of prohibiting a person from giving financial support to his parents. Really! (9-13).

1. Let me ask you a question. What does it mean to honour your parents?

a. Should children honour their parents by obeying them? “Of course,” you say, “Ephesians 6:1-3 says so.” I agree.

b. But what does “honour” mean for adults? Does it also mean “obey”? Is a son who’s 4 years old required to obey his parents? Yes. But what about a son who’s 40? If you are a married 40-year-old, and your parents ask you to change occupation, must you obey this wish? I suspect most if not all of you will say, “No,” I think “honour” must mean something else for adult children.

2. The meaning of “provide financial support” is obviously meant here by Jesus. For adults to “honour” their parents means to make sure they are well taken care of. After all, 1 Timothy 5:8 says, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

3. Here is where the Chinese practice of taking care of elderly parents shames us westerners. Too often Americans will never take their needy parents into their home, but rather relegate them to old folks’ homes. I’m not saying that homes for the elderly are wrong, but I wonder if this is really needed in some cases.

4. But the Pharisees invented a loophole to this fifth commandment in Exodus 20:12. It was called “Corban,” or “offering.” If you made a “Corban” vow, this meant that whatever money you had that was needed to support your aging parents—that money could be used to support the temple.

5. Suppose you have $20,000 which your parents need for support. How do you think the church would feel if you gave it to Grace Baptist and let your parents go hungry? How do you think God would feel?

6. Jesus said that this tradition of Corban was plain sin. It was anti-biblical.

B. Some Chinese New Year traditions are anti-biblical, just like the western ones I noted earlier.

1. Must all the jars in your house be full by tomorrow morning? Or else you will lack during the year? It’s fine to have your shelves full—this is a blessing of God. But let’s not get other people all stressed out emptying the shelves of Yaohan, Cold Storage, and NTUC this afternoon to stock our jars, OK?

2. Is today really the last day you can sweep your house—or else you’ll sweep all the prosperity out of your home this new year? (Until I came to Singapore, I never heard of dirt being equated with prosperity!) No, sweep because your house gets dirty, not because of pagan traditions.

3. Should young people stay up all night on the first day of the new year? Has any research shown that this really does enable their parents to live longer—or is this another unbiblical superstition which has been imposed on us?

4. And don’t break things the next few days—especially cups and saucers? Otherwise the family won’t have harmony? Now this one might have some truth to it—because the parents in my home don’t like it when the kids break the dishes!

5. Can Christians put sugar cane behind the door and light candles? No, a sweet and long life doesn’t come from sugar canes. I’m sure we all wished it was that easy.

6. How about something as innocent as presenting a pair of mandarin oranges to a host? Am I saying not to do it? No, I think this is fine as a custom—but don’t get trapped into believing that two oranges will lead to double blessing.

(So that’s the problem Jesus is addressing—putting man-made practices before God’s Word. But how specifically does it relate to you today?)

**III. To discover if you are a legalist, ask two hard questions.**

 **Here’s a quick checklist to use to see if a tradition is too important to you.**

A. “Do I look down on people who don’t follow my practice?”

1. If so, you are doing what the Pharisees did in verses 1-8. They encouraged a tradition of hand washing which itself was not against God’s law, but because it was required of people, it took the place of God’s law.

a. Someone may not dress like you do.

b. Someone may not worship like you do.

c. Let’s follow the principle of Romans 14 to be sensitive to how what we do affects others, and if it offends, then stop it.

d. But let’s not impose our own personal preferences on others.

2. Do you apply subtle pressure on the church leadership to follow a certain tradition?

a. It can be so disheartening to our pastoral staff, office staff, CE teachers, or deacons to hear us say, “I noticed that such-and-such has been changed. I’m sure you can remedy the situation though.”

b. About 99% of the time these comments relate to issues which are really not addressed in Scripture. Our leaders desire to lead us into new directions relevant to the next millennium. Let’s support them!

(So, our first question relates to the hand washing issue: “Do I look down on people who don’t follow my practice?” Here’s a second question to discern if you are a modern-day Pharisee…)

B. “Am I following a tradition that’s prohibited in God’s Word?”

1. If so, you are doing what the Pharisees did in verses 9-13. They encouraged a tradition called Corban which was actually against God’s law.

2. You know that honouring your parents is biblical, but worshiping them is not. You know that worship is reserved for God alone. Perhaps you have come to know Christ since Chinese New Year last year. You’ve been wondering whether to offer joss sticks and worship to your ancestors. I trust you know what to do—or not do. Here’s your opportunity to demonstrate your faith in the one, true God. Please don’t compromise!

**Conclusion**

1. What’s God telling us today in this Scripture? Simply this:

a. Don’t put tradition over Scripture (MI).

b. This is the truth Christ taught three times in the text: verses 8, 9, and 13 (restatements).

2. Tradition can supersede Scripture in one of two ways (review MPs):

a. It can be an allowable practice which becomes a requirement in addition to Scripture. Not all traditions kill, but those which are requirements for godliness do—like hand washing.

b. It can be a prohibited practice such as Corban or ancestor worship. Following these traditions is in direct violation of the Bible.

3. How can we be free from the grasp that traditions have on us—especially those of us like me who have known the Lord for 20 years or more?

4. We can be free from tradition that kills by being people of the Book—and only the Book!

a. If it’s in the Book, let’s tenaciously hold to it.

b. If it’s not in the Book, let’s relax and give people freedom to grow in areas which might be outside of our own “tradition-zone.”

5. I think there’s a bit of Pharisaism in all of us, including me. Let’s trust God to root it out so we can truly be godly in His sight.

**Preliminary Questions**

**Verses Questions**

Context What did the author record just prior to this passage?

Purpose Why is this passage in the Bible?

Background What historical context helps us understand this passage?

1 Where were they? Why does it say the leaders “came from Jerusalem”?

 What’s the difference between a Pharisee and a “teacher of the law”?

 Why did they gather around Jesus? With curiosity or to be taught or to accuse?

2 Didn’t the disciples know the importance of washing their hands before eating?

 What did someone have to do “wash” correctly? (ceremonial washing, v. 3)

 How could the Pharisees tell the disciples hadn’t washed?

3 What is the tradition of the elders? (Mishnah? Is this the same as the tradition of the Pharisees?

 What’s the difference between the Pharisees and “the elders”?

 Did “all the Jews” mean that every Jew followed these practices?

 Were the Pharisees that popular with the people?

4 How would cups, pitchers and kettles be washed? (Mishnah *Kelim* 25.6-9; Danby, 641)

 Why is it so important to wash after coming from the marketplace?

5 Why come to Jesus if the problem is with the disciples? (He’s the boss)

 Wasn’t Jesus eating with them too? (no-one knows)

 Why would the Pharisees have expected the disciples to follow their traditions? (everyone did)

 Did the disciples follow these traditions prior to their association with Jesus? (I don’t know)

6 Why was Jesus so severe in his attack on these leaders?

 How were the leaders being hypocritical?

 What does it mean to “honor with their lips”?

7 How was their worship vain?

8 Which commands of God had the leaders neglected in their pursuit of tradition?

9 Why did Jesus repeat himself? (emphasis!)

10 Where did Moses say to honor parents?

11 What is the background to “Corban”?

12 Did the leaders really prevent people from helping their parents?

13 What other traditions nullified God’s word?

14 Is verses 14-23 a separate idea? Should I preach these verses too in the same message?

**Tentative Subject/Complement Statements**

Don’t put tradition over Scripture.

Don’t put tradition over Scripture because this is sin.

Put God’s commands over man’s traditions.

Ask, “Is this scriptural?” before you ask, “Is this allowable?”

Make the Bible your authority—not “we’ve always done it this way!”

**Possible Illustrations**

Traditions of Men:

Preach without a tie

Need “may God add His blessing to the reading of His Word” (vs. relying on its inherent authority)

Need to say, “In Jesus’ name, Amen” (vs. “Hello, God? Hi, this is Jan. Thanks, goodbye”)

Deacons must be white collar (vs. God’s character requirements in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1)

Must have a doxology

Must have hymns

Christmas (vs. Victor Smadja, “We messianic Jews don’t celebrate Christmas since it’s not biblical”)

Easter

Closing eyes or sitting down during prayer (though bowing is OK = Exod. 12:27; 23:24)

NT tithing

Prohibiting dancing

Clapping hands

Chinese New Year

Bulletins

Flowers on pulpit

Doxology

“Tradition” (Fiddler on the Roof)

QT necessity

Other Illustrations

CPF for parents

Meaning of “honor” for adult children

Traditions that Kill

*Mark 7:1-13*

**Exegetical Outline**

Prologue: Pharisees added an entire oral law to the Scripture so much that the people could not discern the difference between God’s commands and man’s traditions.

Exegetical Idea: The response of Jesus to the Pharisees’ accusation that his disciples neglected ceremonial washings was that to require human traditions neglects Scripture.

I. (1-5) The content of the accusation from the Pharisees is that Jesus’ disciples do not observe the oral law tradition of ceremonial hand-washing.

A. (1-2) Pharisees from Jerusalem gathering around Jesus observed that Jesus’ disciples didn’t ceremonially wash their hands.

B. (3-4) A parenthetical comment notes that the Pharisees had convinced the common people to observe their tradition of washing hands, cups, pitchers, and kettles.

C. (5) The Pharisees accuse Jesus of uncleanness because He didn’t teach His disciples their traditions.

II. (6-13) The content of Jesus’ response is that requiring obedience to human traditions replaces obeying Scripture.

A. (6-8) Jesus illustrates the Pharisees requiring tradition over Scripture by citing Isaiah’s prophecy about people who claim to honor God but whose traditions show they don’t.

B. (9-13) Jesus illustrates the Pharisees requiring tradition over Scripture by citing the Pharisaical practice of Corban which allows someone to neglect scriptural duties to follow tradition.

**Homiletical Exposition** (cyclical inductive form)

Introduce Subject: When does following traditions become wrong?

There are some good things about traditions (examples)

I. People often hold dearly to human traditions.

A. The Pharisees taught that “cleanliness is next to godliness” (1-5).

B. We, too, have our traditions which we hold dear (examples).

(What did Jesus think of traditions? The answer to this question will also answer the question I raised at the beginning: When does following traditions become wrong?)

II. Jesus warned against putting traditions over Scripture.

A. Jesus gave the Pharisees two examples of legalism: biblical (6-8) and corban (9-13).

B. Jesus warns us not to *require* extra-biblical practices (examples).

1. He Himself followed some man-made traditions—but He never *required* them, such as, men covering head in prayer, Feast of Dedication (John 10).

2. I suspect Jesus doesn’t have a problem with many of our traditions which we consider optional (examples).

3. But what does Jesus think of our *requiring* certain practices (examples)?

III. To discover if you are a legalist, ask some hard questions.

A. “Do I look down on people who don’t follow my practice?”

B. “Do I apply subtle pressure on the church leadership to follow a certain tradition?”

Main Idea: Don’t put tradition over Scripture.

**Homiletical Exposition II** (cyclical inductive form) This one was used in the service

Introduce Subject: When does following traditions become wrong?

I. Traditions are wrong when they are required of others.

A. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for requiring ceremonial hand washing of others (1-8).

B. We, too, have our traditions which we hold over others.

1. He Himself followed some man-made traditions—but He never *required* them, such as, men covering head in prayer, Feast of Dedication (John 10).

2. I suspect Jesus doesn’t have a problem with many of our traditions which we consider optional (examples).

3. But what does Jesus think of our *requiring* certain practices (examples)?

(What did Jesus think of traditions? The answer to this question will also answer the question I raised at the beginning: When does following traditions become wrong?)

II. Traditions are wrong when they contradict Scripture.

A. Jesus prohibited the practice of Corban (9-13).

B. We need to avoid anti-biblical practices (examples).

III. To discover if you are a legalist, ask two hard questions.

A. “Do I look down on people who don’t follow my practice?”

B. “Am I participating in something contrary to Scripture?”

Main Idea: Don’t put tradition over Scripture—either by requiring an extra-biblical practice or participating in an anti-biblical practice.

Not Used:

3. We have traditions relating to dress too.

a. I had originally planned on not wearing a tie this morning, just to see how many would even notice. If you know me well, you’ll know that I always wear a tie to church, even when I don’t preach. In fact, I feel better with a tie on—and my wife likes it too.

b. So why consider not wearing a tie today? To see how many of us think that what is on the outside is more important to us than what is in the inside. This was the Pharisee’s problem, for they thought that dirt on the hands was wrong and were hardly concerned about dirty on the heart.” Jesus confronted this problem directly beginning in verse 14. Can it be that we get so concerned about external traditions that this becomes more important than issues of the heart?

Grace Baptist Church Dr. Rick Griffith

18 February 1996 Single Message

NIV 30 Minutes

Traditions that Kill (not preached—original outline)

*Mark 7:1-13*

**Topic:** Legalism

**Subject:** Don’t put tradition over Scripture

**Complement:** because this is sin.

**Purpose:** The listeners will “loosen up” from requiring extra-biblical practices of others.

**Introduction** Gong (1) -see (3 drop)- fah (1) -chai (2 rise)

1. Sing-ying-kwai-lah! Maybe I better just say “Happy New Year!” It’s that festive time of the year again that we all love—don’t we?

2. At least we all love many of the traditions that go with Lunar New Year—time off from work, time with family, new clothes, and especially the food—now I *know* we all love to eat in true Singapore style!

3. But for Christians, this time of the year brings with it a host of questions too—questions regarding traditions. Which are OK and which are not OK for believers in Jesus Christ?

a. Must all the jars in your house be full by tomorrow morning?

b. Is today really the last day you can sweep your house?

c. Should young people stay up all night on the first day of the new year?

d. And don’t break things the next few days—especially cups and saucers?

e. Can Christians put sugar cane behind the door and light candles?

f. How about something as innocent as presenting a pair of mandarin oranges to a host?

4. I must admit, I found it humorous that today’s message, “Traditions that Kill,” was assigned to a *westerner* to preach on the day before this auspicious holiday. This may be where even angels dare to tread! Yet when I worried about whether I’d be saying the wrong thing, I was comforted by a few things.

a. First, maybe you’ll still forgive me for being a westerner—especially since we have our own superstitious traditions that have been part of our culture for years—like all of these which bring bad luck: don’t walk under a ladder, don’t allow a black cat to cross in front of you, don’t step on cracks in the sidewalk, and breaking a mirror will lead to seven years of bad luck.

b. I also felt comforted to preach today because if I just stick to the text of Scripture, I ought to be in good shape.

c. Third, there are many good things to say about traditions.

1) Traditions have a way of bonding us together. After all, we do call it the “reunion dinner,” don’t we? In fact, in a sense my family has a good tradition in this regard: we eat breakfast and dinner together every day as a family. My family also has a tradition of eating pizza in front of the TV every Sunday night. This is the only time we allow the TV on during meals, so this makes it somewhat special.

2) Traditions also remind us not to forget our past. Susan and I have a tradition of making a short cassette tape every wedding anniversary, reminding ourselves of God’s goodness over the past year. We also have a Swedish smorgasbord every Christmas eve to remind us of our Swedish heritage.

5. So I want to say up front this morning that traditions *in and of themselves* are not wrong. But they can be—so when are traditions wrong? (subject) When do they “kill”? That’s the issue Jesus addresses in Mark 7.

6. But first, let’s look at verses 1-5 of Mark 7 where we see an example of how… (intro. MPI)

**I. People often hold dearly to human traditions.**

 Traditions become so much a part of us that we can hardly think of life without them.

 Note, for example, how…

A. The Pharisees taught that “cleanliness is next to godliness” (1-5).

1. Notice how these leaders had a hawk eye on Jesus in verses 1-2…

a. Interesting, isn’t it, that these religious policemen had traveled all the way from Jerusalem to the Galilee where Jesus was—a four day trip! A careful reading a verse 1 notes that it was the scribes who had made this long trip. Pharisees lived throughout the land, but the scribes clustered around the temple area. But they had traveled long dusty roads…

b. Why? They are gathering around Jesus as investigators to see if He trips up on any of their traditions. Apparently He doesn’t, but they notice that some of the disciples break one of their traditions of washing the hands.

c. Perhaps as we read this text, you thought, “Mom always told me to wash before supper, but maybe these rough neck country bumkin disciples didn’t know better.”

2. No, it’s not that they didn’t wash at all. It’s that they didn’t use the “proper procedure” which Mark begins to explain in verses 3-4…

a. I remember staying at the Holyland Hotel in Jerusalem seeing an interesting sink in front of the dining room. It had a large area to wash, including a huge metal cup with two handles on it. This is for the orthodox Jews to wash their hands properly just before entering the dining room for a meal. The tradition prescribes that the washing must go down to the elbows, and that the last bit of water must fall off the elbow. It’s a bit like what orthopaedic surgeon Dr. Tan Chong Tien does to prepare for surgery!

b. This procedure came about originally from Exodus 30:19, where the priests were required to wash their hands and feet before entering the tabernacle. It was sticky maneuver, for the priest had to have flowing water cover both his hands and feet at the same time! [demonstrate] Lane, 245

c. In the centuries following, this law for the priests at the tabernacle gradually became expected of *everyone at every meal!* Bab. Talmud *Sotah* 4b; Shabbath 62b

d. The Pharisees had evidently successfully convinced the masses that flowing water was the proper method, for Mark says this was the custom of “all the Jews”! In fact, Mark seems to say with a bit of sarcasm that the religious leaders had all kinds of traditions relating to vessels. In my research on this I found in the Mishnah 45 pages of laws relating to which pots, cups, and utensils are proper—if they have a chip on them, or they have been repaired, or what materials are allowed, or if a cockroach was in the oven with them, etc. Danby, 604-49

e. Certainly the disciples knew of the traditional washing method, but their association with Jesus had freed them from this addition to the law. Maybe they just dipped their hands into a bowl to clean them. And the Pharisees could easily observe this “free spirit.”

3. So, since Jesus is the “boss,” verse 5 reports that…

(So do you get the setting? Maybe another way to explain this is to note how…)

B. We also have our traditions which we hold so dear we impose thm on others. Maybe they don’t relate so much to washing, but they are just as strong in other areas—like what we say.

1. I’m so glad this church doesn’t require us to always say after every Scripture reading, “May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word.” I remember preaching at one church where I read the Scripture text, then sat down during the hymn just before I went up to the pulpit again to preach. I’ll never forget the look on the song leader’s face as he got up to lead the hymn. You see, I hadn’t said, “May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word” and this man was terrified! So he quickly said it himself: “May God add His blessing to the reading of His Word” then lead the hymn! I thought that God’s Word had inherent authority without the need to pronounce a blessing on it!

2. Another tradition is requiring those who pray to end, “In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

a. Did you know that this phrase is not found in the Bible? Yes, we are commanded to ask in Christ’s name, but must we use this as a formula?

b. I remember once when I was a pastor I was counseling a family in crisis. I encouraged them all to pray together, and the young mother Jan, unaccustomed to prayer, prayed like this: “Hello? God? Hi, this is Jan. We’re having a tough time in this family right now so can you please send some extra angels to help? Thanks, bye!” Do you see how traditional we get in our prayer language? That prayer was a breath of fresh air to me—and to God too!

3. We impose traditions relating to dress too. I thought about not wearing a tie this morning just to test you whether you too think that what’s on the outside is most important!

4. The Chinese New Year traditions shouldn’t be imposed on others, just like the western ones I noted earlier.

a. Must all the jars in your house be full by tomorrow morning? Or else you will lack during the year? It’s fine to have your shelves full—this is a belssing of God. But let’s not get othr people all stressed out emptying the shelves of Yaohan, Cold Storage, and NTUC this afternoon, OK?

b. Is today really the last day you can sweep your house—or else you’ll sweep all the prosperity out of your home this new year? (Until I came to Singapore I never heard of dirt being equated with prosperity!) No, sweep because your house gets dirty, not because of pagan traditions.

c. Should young people stay up all night on the first day of the new year? Has any research shown that this really does enable their parents to live longer—or is this another unbiblical superstition which has been imposed on us?

d. And don’t break things the next few days—especially cups and saucers? Otherwise the family won’t have harmony? Now this one might have some truth to it—because the parents in my home don’t like it when the kids break the dishes!

e. Can Christians put sugar cane behind the door and light candles? No, a sweet and long life doesn’t come from sugar canes. I’m sure we all wished it was that easy.

f. How about something as innocent as presenting a pair of mandarin oranges to a host? Am I saying not to do it? No, I think this is fine as a custom—but don’t get trapped into believing that two oranges will lead to double blessing.

(Well, what did Jesus think of traditions? The answer to this question will also answer the question I raised at the beginning: When does following traditions become wrong? Here’s the key principle Christ taught in verses 6-13…)

**II. Jesus warned against putting traditions over Scripture.**

 **[When man-made practices are more important than biblical teaching, it’s wrong. In fact, it’s called legalism!]**

A. Jesus gave the Pharisees two examples of legalism.

1. First He notes that traditions are wrong when we impose our own rules on others (6-8).

a. His first example of legalism is a biblical quote from Isaiah of people whose own rules are more important than God’s rules.

b. The Pharisees gave “lip service” to the God who requires “heart service” (6)!

c. How is their worship in vain? It is more concerned with following man-made “rules of worship” than anything else—make sure your head is covered, make sure you stand at the right time, make sure the women are kept separate from the men.

d. It’s not that Jesus was against tradition. It was that He was against tradition taking such a high place that it usurped God’s very commands, as noted in verse 8.

2. Jesus’ second example of when traditions are wrong is when following our practice actually violates God’s Word. The specific example here concerns the Pharisees’ practice of prohibiting a person from giving financial support for his parents. Really! (9-13).

a. Let me ask you a question. What does it mean to honor your parents?

1) Should children honor their parents by obeying them? “Of course,” you say, “because Ephesians 6:1-3 says so.” I agree.

2) But what does “honor” mean for adults? Does it also mean “obey”? Is a son who’s 4 years old required to obey his parents? Yes. But what about a son who’s 40? If you are a married 40 year old, and your parents do not want you to go to church, must you obey this wish? I suspect most if not all of you will say, “No,” I think “honor” must mean something else for adult children.

b. The meaning of “provide financial support” is obviously meant here by Jesus. For adults to “honor” their parents means to make sure they are well taken care of. After all, 1 Timothy 5:8 says, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

c. Here is where the Chinese practice of taking care of elderly parents shames us westerners. Too often Americans will never take their needy parents into their home, but rather relegate them to old folks’ homes. I’m not saying that homes for the elderly are wrong, but I wonder if this is really needed in some cases.

d. But the Pharisees invented a loophole to this biblical requirement of Exodus 20:12. It was called “Corban,” or “offering.” If you made a “Corban” vow, this meant that whatever money you had that was needed to support your aging parents—that money could be used to support the temple.

d. Suppose you have $20,000 which your parents need for support. How do you think the church would feel if you gave it to Grace Baptist and let your parents go hungry? How do you think God would feel?

(So is Jesus against tradition? Yes and no. He definitely is against it when it contradicts God’s Law, as the Pharisees were doing. Also…)

B. Jesus was against *requiring* extra-biblical practices.

1. He Himself followed some man-made traditions—but He never *required* them.

a. He knew the tradition of attending synagogue, even though this was never commanded of God—but He still went.

b. He also attended the Feast of Dedication in John 10:22, which was never commanded by God. But Jesus never said that Jews *must* do these things as the OT didn’t command them.

2. I suspect Jesus doesn’t have a problem with many of our traditions which we consider optional.

a. I don’t feel that Christ is displeased with us for celebrating Christmas or Easter, even though they not commanded in Scripture. Last December in Jerusalem we heard an elderly, godly, Jewish Christian tell our tour group, “We messianic Jews don’t celebrate Christmas since it’s not biblical.” You should have heard the hush over the group!

b. I don’t think it’s wrong to close your eyes during prayer, even though this is not biblical either.

3. But what does Jesus think of our *requiring* certain practices?

a. What if we make the celebration of Christmas an issue of spirituality? God would be displeased.

b. What if we feel that the offering must be followed by a doxology? There’s nothing wrong with having a doxology, but there’s also nothing wrong with *not* having it. No text says, “Thou shalt sing a doxology after collecting the offering.”

c. Can it be that some people really get bent out of shape to have the order of service changed? Must the bulletin always look the same each week? Must we even have a bulletin?

d. I thank God that He’s allowed me to play a part in two established institutions in Singapore: Singapore Bible College which is 44 years old, Grace Baptist Church, which is 37 years old. There’s real advantages in being a part of ministries which have a rich heritage of faithful to God.

e. But I’ve also learned something in my ministry experience: older institutions are slow to change because they are rich in tradition. I really pitied one of my students who is going on the staff of a church in Singapore which is over 100 years old! He has had great difficulty with the famous last seven words of a dying church: “We’ve never done it that way before!”

(So that’s the problem Jesus is addressing—putting man-made practices before God’s Word. But how does it relate to us today?)

**III. To discover if you are a legalist, ask some hard questions.**

 **Here’s a checklist to use to see if tradition is too important to you.**

A. “Do I look down on people who don’t follow my practice?”

1. If so, you are doing what the Pharisees did it verses 1-8. They encouraged a tradition of hand washing which itself was not against God’s law, but because it was required of people, it took the place of God’s law.

a. Someone may not dress like you do.

b. Someone may not worship like you do.

c. Let’s follow the principle of Romans 14 to be sensitive to how what we do affects others, and if it offends, then stop it.

d. But let’s not impose our own personal preferences on others.

2. Do you apply subtle pressure on the church leadership to follow a certain tradition?

a. It can be so disheartening to our pastoral staff, office staff, CE teachers, or deacons to hear us say, “I noticed that such-and-such has been changed. What are you going to do about it?”

b. About 99% of the time these comments relate to issues which are really not addressed in Scripture. Our leaders desire to lead us into new directions relevant to the 1990s. Let’s support them!

(So our first question relates to the hand washing issue: “Do I look down on people who don’t follow my practice?” Here’s a second question to discern if you are a modern-day Pharisee…)

B. “Am I following a tradition that actually is prohibited in God’s Word?”

1. If so, you are doing what the Pharisees did it verses 9-13. They encouraged a tradition called Corban which was actually against God’s law.

2. You know that honoring your parents is biblical, but worshiping them is not. You know that worship is reserved for God alone. Perhaps you have come to know Christ since Chinese New Year last year. You’ve been wondering whether to offer joss sticks and worship to your ancestors. I trust you know what to do—or not do. Here’s your opportunity to demonstrate your faith in the one, true God. Please don’t compromise!

**Conclusion**

M.I.1. What’s God telling us today in this Scripture?

a. Simply this: Don’t put tradition over Scripture.

b. This is the truth Christ taught three times in the text: verses 8, 9, and 13.

2. Tradition can supersede Scripture in one of two ways:

a. It can be a practice which is allowable but becomes a requirement in addition to Scripture. Don’t allow any extra-biblical practice to become so important that it is a non-negotiable, for if you do, pretty soon this will take precedence over God’s Word. Not all traditions kill, but those which become requirements for godliness do.

b. It can be a practice which is not allowed, such as Corban. Following these traditions is in direct violation of the Bible.

3. How can we be freed from the grasp that traditions have on us—especially those of us like myself who have known the Lord for 20 years or more?

4. I think we’re going to be free from tradition which kills by being people of the Book—and only the Book!

a. If it’s in the Book, let’s tenaciously hold to it.

b. If it’s not in the Book, let’s relax and allow ourselves to grow in areas which might be outside of our “tradition-zone.”

5. I think there’s a bit of Phariseeism in all of us, including me. Let’s trust God to root it out so we can truly be godly in His sight.