

The Traditions of Men: How *Not* to Solve Your Sin Problem

I. Introduction: This Sermon Was Inspired By...

A. Two Disappointing Sermons

1. One sermon discussing how much we should try to preserve cultural traditions in our churches.
 - a. Near the start of his sermon the preacher admitted, "I don't have much Scripture for this sermon." And he didn't! Almost the entire sermon was made up of his own rational arguments and conclusions.
 - b. I went home and quickly filled a page with biblical references and data about culture and tradition. The Bible had a lot to say on the topic, but it just didn't say what the preacher was looking for!
2. One sermon on the same text we want to examine today: Mark 7.
 - a. As we will see, this chapter reveals the danger of elevating human traditions. However, it seemed to me that the preacher spent about half of his time saying things that had no basis in the text, emphasizing the positive role of tradition and how we should be slow to change it. Even if what the preacher said happened to be true at points, his ideas were coming from his own head, he wasn't preaching from the Bible!
 - b. I went home and spent my afternoon examining Mark 7 more closely, creating an outline of the chapter that eventually became the basis for my sermon today.

B. One Splintered Church

1. The conservative Mennonite church as a whole: Excerpts from *Nelson's Guide to Denominations* (J. Gordon Melton, published 2007):
 - a. Jacob Amman, one of the early Amish leaders (seventeenth century), "emphasized the member's need to avoid worldliness. Those attracted to his teachings soon came to be identified by a distinctive dress. Men wore broad brim hats and coats and pants without buttons. They grew beards without mustaches. Women wore their hair in a bun under bonnets and aprons over their ankle-length dresses. The number of distinctives multiplied as new innovations in the larger culture were one by one rejected." (248)
 - b. "Through the nineteenth century, the Mennonites slowly spread across America. They were an agricultural people who sought to live a simple, unassuming life... Their early refusal to adjust their clothing to new styles marked them as a separate group, the 'plain people.' Slowly, the main body of Mennonites adapted to the changing world and adopted more sophisticated ways of distinguishing the biblical principles from which they were committed from those cultural artifacts that offered only to keep them attached to the seventeenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, the real challenges came from the developing technology that made traditional farming uncompetitive and modern inventions (such as indoor plumbing) designed to made [sic] daily existence more comfortable. At various points, divisions occurred over the propriety of adopting such things as contemporary clothing, automobiles, or improved farm equipment. [Later divisions occurred

over issues of German versus English, how much schooling was necessary and what should be taught, and evangelical influences such as Sunday schools and revivalism.]” (248-49)

- c. “Given the relatively free atmosphere in the United States, and the large number of issues that were continually pressing upon the Mennonites as they attempted to define themselves as a people apart, it is not surprising that the movement splintered into a number of separate factions. Given the relatively small size of the total Mennonite community (which numbers only several hundred thousand), it is the most splintered segment of American Christianity.” (249-50).

C. Dangers of this sermon inspiration:

1. I could simply be reacting to these concerns I have, and end up doing my own end-run around God's word, promoting my own agenda. Please hold me accountable, and let me know if you think I mishandle God's Word!
2. I could become proud and despise the people I have just described.

D. My desire:

1. Help us listen closely to God's word, coming under its authority without adding or subtracting.
2. Pray: “May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer” (Ps 19:14, para.).

II. Reading of Text: Mark 7:1-23

III. Preview of Sermon:

A. How we will interpret this text. We will:

1. Outline the flow of the story, breaking the passage into paragraphs (especially following the dialogue)
2. Look for the main point: of each paragraph, and of the entire passage
3. Zoom in, zoom out: Examine key words and the surrounding context
4. Consider three levels of meaning of this passage:
 - a. For Jesus' audience (“What was Jesus trying to teach?”)
 - b. For Mark's audience (Builds on 1; “Why did Mark include this passage here?”)
 - c. For us (Builds on 1 and 2; “What are the implications of this passage for us?”)

B. Expositional Outline:

1. What do you see? (7:1-5)
2. What do you teach? (7:6-13)
3. What do you clean? (7:14-23)

IV. What Do You See? (Exegesis and application of 7:1-5)

- A. Main point: Pharisees/scribes accuse Jesus because his disciples don't observe their hand-washing rules.

B. Zoom in (key words):

1. *Pharisees* and *scribes* (v 1):

- a. What is the first word you think of when you hear “Pharisee”? (Hypocrite?)
 - b. “Pharisee” means “separated one.” They were conscientious, zealous for the law; though they were a minority group, they were trying to impose their vision of morality and obedience to the law on Israel. (Contrast favorably with Sadducees [political compromise, abbreviated Law], Zealots [kingdom by force].)
 - c. “We should recognize that what we derisively call legalism today was to the Pharisee a sincere effort to apply God's will to everyday life. All law requires interpretation.” (David Garland, *Mark*, NIVAC, 286, n.24)
 - d. (Zoom out) Mark 2:16–3:6. Pharisees had:
 - i. condemned Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners.
 - ii. condemned Jesus for not observing the Sabbath
 - iii. held counsel with the Herodians, looking for a way to destroy Jesus
 - e. Mark 3:22. Scribes had accused Jesus of being possessed by an unclean spirit!
2. *Defiled* (v 2) – Note Mark's Gentile audience:
- a. “Unwashed”; but the issue was not hygiene or any other physical concern.
 - b. “Defiled” is literally, “common,” the opposite of “holy, devoted to God.”
 - c. History of hand-washing rules: “The biblical mandate that the priests had to wash their hands and feet prior to entering the Tabernacle... provided the foundation for the wide-spread practice of ritual washings... At least as early as the second century B.C. many Jews voluntarily assumed the purity laws of the priests and regularly washed their hands before morning prayer... The custom of washing the hands before eating bread was also grounded in priestly practice, in the conviction that daily food should be eaten as if it were priestly food... The Pharisees surpassed the priests in their zeal to safeguard themselves from ritual defilement and were strong proponents of 'the priesthood of all believers' in the sense that they considered the priestly regulations to be obligatory for all men. It is important to appreciate the concern to sanctify ordinary acts of life which lay behind this extension of priestly regulations to the laity. Its finest intention was the demonstration that all Israel was devoted to God and the Law, and the fulfillment of the injunction: 'You shall be holy to me' (Lev. 20:26).” (William L. Lane, *Mark*, NICNT, 245-46.)
 - d. In the OT, all the cleanliness laws were intended, in part, to separate Jews from Gentiles, marking them off as God's special, holy people. Just as all kinds of animals, foods, and everyday objects and activities were divided into clean and unclean categories, so people were divided into holy and unholy. After the Babylonian exile, Jews increasingly encountered Gentiles in everyday life, and so “the question of ritual cleanliness took on a new significance as a way of maintaining Jewish purity over against Gentile culture” (Edwards, 205).
 - e. “Archeological excavations continue to discover Jewish... cleansing pools that were a standard feature of Jewish homes in the first century... [They] have even been discovered on the summit of Masada, one of the most arid places on earth.” (Edwards, 208.)
 - f. Key point: Ritual defilement was thought to break fellowship with God.
 - g. This was important to the Pharisees:
 - i. Comparison: They felt about eating with unwashed hands like we might feel if people had their eyes open and were talking during public prayer at church (Garland, 273).
 - ii. One later rabbi said: “Whoever eats bread without previously washing the hands is as though he had intercourse with a harlot.” (Garland, 286 n.3)

3. *Tradition of the elders* (v 3):
 - a. Hand-washing rules were one part of the tradition of the elders—oral law.
 - b. “By Jesus' day, adherence to the unwritten oral tradition was as important for the Pharisees as was adherence to the Torah itself. Although the claim cannot be supported from the OT itself, rabbis promoted the idea that Moses had received *two* laws on Mt. Sinai, the written Torah and the oral Mishnah. The Mishnah was believed to preserve an unbroken chain of authorized tradition extending from Moses to the 'Great Synagogue' of Jesus' day... The Mishnah called the oral interpretation 'a fence around the Torah'... 'fence' being understood as preservation of the integrity of the written law by elaborating every conceivable implication of it. In general, the Torah was understood as *policy*. Its commandments declared *what* God decreed, but not always *how* they were to be fulfilled. The Torah alone, according to advocates of the oral tradition, was believed to be too ambiguous to establish and govern the Jewish community. The oral tradition as preserved in the Mishnah, on the other hand, prescribed in inviite detail how the intent of the Torah ought to be fulfilled in actual circumstances.” (Edwards, 208).
 - c. “Theoretically, the oral law was a fence which safeguarded the people from infringing the Law. In actuality it represented a tampering with the Law which resulted inevitably in distortion and ossification [turn into bone, rigid] of the living word of God.” (Lane, 248-49)
 - d. Note that “tradition” here is more than an informal *custom*; it is a human *rule*, a *requirement*—not just something we *normally* do, but something we think we and others *must* do. We cannot avoid having customs, but we should avoid turning them into unbending laws!

- C. Zoom out (context) – Jesus' gracious miracles—feeding, rescuing, healing, purifying:
 1. Feeding of 5000 (6:33-44)
 - a. Another story about eating—with no observance of hand-washing rules.
 - b. “‘They all ate and were satisfied.’ The word 'all' is significant. Nowhere did the Torah and the oral tradition regulate Jewish life more than at table. The effect of kosher was to ensure that only proper foods that were properly prepared were eaten by the properly clean; unclean foods and unclean persons were necessarily excluded. At the wilderness banquet, however, the ritual hierarchy of kosher is abandoned in favor of an open invitation and inclusiveness of all people.” (James R. Edwards, *Mark*, 193).
 2. Jesus calms the sea (6:45-52)
 - a. The disciples “were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.”
 - b. Note *lack of understanding* and focus on *heart condition*, both emphasized again in today's passage.
 - c. Last time that hardness of heart was mentioned (3:5; healing of man with deformed hand), it was a description of outsiders (members of the synagogue, Pharisees, Herodians); now it infects insiders (the disciples)!
 - d. “Discipleship is more endangered by lack of faith and hardness of heart than by external dangers” (Edwards, 201).
 3. Great crowds seek healing from Jesus (6:53-56)
 - a. “As many as touched [the fringe of his garment] were made well.”
 - b. Jesus undoubtedly was in contact with many unclean persons—but rather than becoming contaminated, he was purifying them as he healed them!

- D. Conclusion/Bridging the gap:
 1. The Pharisees were sincere; they would not have considered themselves

hypocrites! (Consider Paul pre-conversion...)

- a. Garland: “With our 20/20 spiritual hindsight we can readily see how the Pharisees’ tradition thwarted God’s will and strangled faith. We quickly dismiss their traditions about purity of hands, pots, and pans as a silly fixation on matters of no consequence. To bridge the context to our own situation, however, we must understand the honest concerns behind these traditions. We should not disdain their issues before asking why they were important to them so that we can relate it to our own religiosity. *Garland, David E. (2011-03-01). Mark (NIV Application Commentary, The) (p. 278). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.*
 - b. Garland: “We can identify three purposes behind the development of this tradition that have affinities with the development of traditions in Christian circles. (1) *The tradition of the elders tried to make the basic requirement that Israel be holy to the Lord (Lev. 19: 2) something that was attainable in everyday life...* They did not attempt to skirt the demands of the law. These pious interpreters had a genuine desire to provide precise guidance for laypeople on what one must do to be holy. They did not think they were voiding the commands of God but making them applicable... (2) *The tradition of the elders was intended to deter pagan influences that surrounded the nation from making inroads into Judaism* (see Lev. 20: 1–7). This attitude is expressed in the Letter of Aristeas 139, which exults in the law that “surrounds us with unbroken palisades and iron walls, to prevent our mixing with any of the other peoples in any matter being thus kept pure in body and soul, preserved from false beliefs, and worshiping the only God omnipotent over all creation.” It encouraged people to make a conscious effort to set themselves apart from the unwashed hordes who were destined for destruction... The Pharisees acted like Daniels by trying to preserve and proclaim their distinctive holiness, not like Mordecais, who counseled Esther to keep her national identity a secret (Est. 2: 10, 20)... (3) *The tradition assumes that God ordered the details, and one must study and enact them to meet God.* ...If one were to ask, “How do I approach almighty God?” the psalmist says, with “clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps. 24: 4). But what precisely is a person supposed to do? The rabbis would say that when one eats, one approaches the throne of the almighty God, and one must wash one’s hands and hold the wine in the right hand and the oil in the left. That is something that one can do! ...This tradition gives everyday acts of life holy significance and reminds one of God and how one can concretely show one’s devotion to God. The Pharisees affirmed that God created order and that human affairs prosper only when things are ordered. Consequently, they preferred strict rules, orderly programs, and careful debates about the application of texts, lest they lose control. From their perspective Jesus was completely out of control because he disregarded their rules and crossed their boundaries.” *Garland, David E. (2011-03-01). Mark (NIV Application Commentary, The) (p. 279-80). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. Emphasis added.*
2. Despite their sincerity, the Pharisees were blind: They couldn't see who Jesus was, his wonderful works, or the good news of the kingdom he was bringing!

E. Application: What do you see? Christ at work, or your rules being broken?

1. “They saw...” (7:2): Do we have eyes to see what Jesus is doing to feed and heal and purify others, or are we so preoccupied with how others violate our applications of Scripture that we are blind to what God is doing?
 - a. Do we allow Jesus to work even if he doesn't always follow our rules?
 - b. Do we allow others to follow Jesus without demanding they also follow us?
2. John Coblenz: “I have purposed to rejoice in Jesus wherever I see him.” (Statement made at Forum for Doctrinal Studies, 2012.)

V. What Do You Teach? (Exegesis and application of 7:6-13)

A. 7:6

1. Notice three things about Jesus' approach:
 - a. He immediately launches a counter-charge. This is serious! This is no mere friendly theological discussion, but a conflict between two diametrically opposing ways of serving God.
 - b. He doesn't directly answer the Pharisee's surface question about hand-washing at all. Rather, he bypasses "hands" and goes straight for the "heart."
 - c. He counters tradition of the elders with Scripture itself (Isaiah, later Moses).
2. Notice three textual details:
 - a. "hypocrites" (actors). "It would be a mistake to assume that in calling the Pharisees 'hypocrites' Jesus accuses them of lack of dedication. In the judgment of both Jesus and Mark they were gravely mistaken in the course they pursued, but they were not, as far as we can tell, either superficial or uncommitted." (Edwards, 209). So, how were they hypocrites?
 - b. "Lips" versus "hearts": Hypocrites because they were saying one thing and devoted to another.
 - c. "Their heart is far from me": Where were their hearts? What is wrong with their hearts?

B. 7:7

1. Explains the nature of their hypocrisy:
 - a. Its result: "in vain do they worship me"
 - b. Its root: "teaching as doctrines the commandments of men".
 - i. NIV: "Their teachings are merely human rules."
 - ii. Despite going through the motions of worship, *their hearts were devoted to their own rules*, not to God himself! Thus, they were hypocrites.

C. 7:8

1. Here Jesus summarizes the Pharisee's root problem, the problem that turned them into hypocrites.

D. Isaiah quote in OT context (29:13):

1. Isaiah is also condemning the Jerusalem leaders:
 - a. Comes from "a series of woe oracles (Isa. 28-31) that... constitute Isaiah's most sustained attack on the nation's leaders... The setting is Judah's abortive participation in a rebel coalition with Egypt against Assyria... Those purported to be 'wise' are in fact nothing more than 'obstinate children'... who reject Yahweh's instruction..., relying instead on their own clever strategies." (Rikk E. Watts, *CNTOT*, 163)
 - b. "Nevertheless,... (cf. 1:10-15), leaders and people together persist in earnest prayers and performance of religious duties even as they pursue strategies that are directly at odds with Yahweh's word... Yahweh indignantly rejects this 'honor' as worthless lip service and empty adherence not even to his word, but rather, adding insult to injury, to merely human requirements." (Watts, 164).
2. Quote context suggests not only conviction of sin, but promise of judgment:
 - a. Isaiah 29:14 continues by prophesying judgment on Israel's leaders: "Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the

discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

- b. Elsewhere in the NT (Rom 11, etc.), this blindness of Israel's leaders is tied to the judgment on the Jewish nation and the offer of salvation to the Gentiles.

E. 7:9-13

1. Notice three details about Jesus' approach (very similar to in 7:6!):
 - a. His satirical tone: “a fine way” - “beautiful way”!
 - b. His frank language that does not allow the Pharisees to avoid responsibility:
 - i. Note transition from “tradition of the elders” (7:5) to “tradition of men” (7:8) to “your tradition” (7:9, 13).
 - ii. Note repeated use of “you” (7:11-13).
 - c. He (again) counters the tradition of the elders with Scripture itself.
 - i. The Jews said the oral tradition came from Moses, so Jesus quotes from Moses himself (5th commandment) to prove their oral traditions were wrong!
 - ii. *Notice: Jesus sets a human rule directly against God's commandments, side by side, testing one by the other. This approach is key, as we will see in our application!*
2. “Corban”: literally, “offering.” “Corban was similar to the concept of deferred giving. Today a person may will property to a charity or institution at his or her death, though retaining possession over the property and the proceeds or interest accruing from it until then. In the case of Corban, a person could dedicate goods to God and withdraw them from ordinary use, although retaining control over them himself. In the example of v. 11, a son declares his property Corban, which at his death would pass into the possession of the temple. In the meantime, however, the son retains control over the property—and his control derives his parents of the support that otherwise would have been derived from the property in their old age... This was not the end of the matter, however. Once property had been offered to God, priests discouraged anyone from withdrawing it from Corban in order to return it to human use. According to Josephus, priests required fifty shekels from a man, and thirty from a woman, to cancel Corban.... [God's command to honor one's parents was] not simply thereby nullified but actually reversed by *forbidding* a child to do “anything for his father or mother”” (Edwards, 210-11).

F. Application: What do you teach? God's word or your traditions?

1. Are there ways that we “leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition [human rules] of men”? Are there ways that we “make void the word of God by our tradition that we have handed down”?
2. Three tests to reveal whether we are honoring the commandments of men above the commandments of God:
 - a. Does our application of one of God's commands hinder us from obeying any other of God's commands?
 - i. Does our application of one of God's specific commands (such as being a good steward of your finances) hinder us from obeying one of the two great commandments (loving God and loving neighbor)?
 - ii. Does our application of one of the two great commandments (loving God) hinder us from obeying the other (loving neighbor)? (Or reverse.)

- The Pharisees, in effect, justified their disobedience of the 2nd commandment (judgmental to outsiders) by their rigid obedience of the 1st commandment (purity laws).
 - Suggestion: Moral conservatives tend to justify their disobedience of the 2nd commandment by their obedience of the 1st; moral liberals tend to justify their disobedience of the 1st commandment by their obedience of the 2nd. For example, consider how these groups sometimes handle modesty, or homosexuality.
 - We must never pit the two great commandments against each other. Rather, we must ensure our practices honor *both* commandments!
- b. Are we more grieved when others disregard our traditions than when we disobey God's word?
- c. Do we find it hard to clearly distinguish between our applications and God's commands?
3. Practical examples (some are intentionally uncomfortable!):
- a. Examples for (2.a) above:
- i. Does a requirement that men wear suits to Sunday morning service (application of command to love God) hinder us from loving our neighbor (especially the poor and the visitor)?
 - ii. Does an expectation that all church members give financial support to a church school (application of biblical commands to train our children) hinder us from obeying commands to love neighbor as ourselves (especially the poor)?
 - iii. Does a prescribed, highly specific, uniform application of the headship veiling or modest clothing (both commanded in Scripture) hinder us from obeying the command that “each one should be fully convinced in his own mind... Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer” (Rom 14:5b, 13a)?
 - iv. Does an expectation that our sisters sew clothes for themselves and their families (application of separation from the world) hinder us from obeying the teachings about diversities of giftings within the body (not all can sew!), the commands about welcoming the poor (it is often cheaper to buy used clothes than to sew new ones) and the example of the Acts 15 conference, which aimed to “not trouble” Gentile converts nor “lay on [them any] greater burden” than necessary?
 - v. Does having male teachers for women's SS classes (application of commands for women to be silent in church and to prioritize their responsibilities at home) hinders us from obeying the commands that older women teach the younger?
 - vi. Does our form of church decision making (such as a heavy reliance on the lot during ordinations, or an assumption that a 2/3 majority vote of members is the voice of God) hinder us from obeying the commands to choose qualified leaders and work for consensus (agree with one another, 2 Cor 13; unity of the faith, Eph 4; living in harmony, Rom 12, 14)?
 - vii. Does the practice of having self-supporting ministry (application of

command that elders not serve for shameful gain) hinder us from obeying the command that those who preach the gospel must be financially supported, and the command that elders must work hard at caring for the needs of the church?

- viii. Does the tradition of delaying all baptisms until at least age 14 or 15 (application of teaching that baptism is for believers only) hinder us from obeying commands to welcome the children, enter the kingdom like a little child, and not put a stumbling block before the “little ones”?
- ix. Does the application of closed communion (building on the command to not partake in an unworthy manner and the teaching that communion involves our shared oneness in Christ) hinder us from obeying the command to “wait for one another/share with one another/all eat together” (1 Cor 11:33), the command to “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom 15:7), and Christ's prayer for the unity of all believers (John 17)?
- x. Does the practice of second and third-degree separation (application of commands to avoid false teachers) hinder us from obeying commands about unity of the church?
 - “We won't go to such-and-such a Bible school, etc. because people from such-and-such a group go there, and they also affiliate with so-and-so who teaches Calvinist doctrine or allows divorce.”
- xi. Does a practice of using only the KJV (application of commands to honor God's word) hinder us from obeying the commands about making the gospel clearly accessible to all and helping everyone understand God's Word? (“Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— 4 *that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.*” Col 4:3-4.) Consider:
 - the great effort Paul expended to try to communicate the gospel to all different kinds of cultures;
 - the fact that the NT quotes the OT not in Hebrew, but in Greek, sometimes even paraphrasing it in order to bring out the meaning more clearly;
 - the fact that we don't even have Jesus' words in the language he spoke them, but that the NT gospel writers translated and often paraphrased his words to communicate them to their audiences.
- xii. Does an expectation of complete stillness and silence in church (application of command to reverence God) hinder us from obeying biblical teachings about making a joyful noise, lifting up holy hands in prayer, clapping hands, saying “amen,” and welcoming children?
- xiii. Does a highly programmed service order (application of the command to do all things decently and in order) hinder us from obeying biblical teaching about allowing each person to bring “a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (1 Cor 14:26)?
- xiv. Does a tradition that is very skeptical of dramatic spiritual gifts (application of command to test everything) hinder us from obeying the command to “not quench the Spirit” and “not despise prophecies” (1 Thess

5:19-20)?

- xv. Does a tradition that exalts rural living (application of the command to “come out from among them and be separate” and “work with your hands”) hinder us from fulfilling the Great Commission?
- xvi. Does a practice of avoiding Bible commentaries (application of commands not to listen to false teachers and to avoid useless debates about words) hinder us from obeying command to rightly divide the word of truth?

- b. Examples for (2.b) above. Which troubles me more:
 - i. When my brother wears a T-shirt to church or when I dress immodestly at the public beach?
 - ii. When my brother fails to bow and pray before his meal or when I grumble about the food in front of me?
 - iii. When my brother worships God while playing his guitar or when I daydream about my new vehicle all through the worship service?
 - iv. When my brother sends his children to public school or when I fail to take time to train my children in the ways of the Lord?
 - v. When a single mother works part-time as a nurse, leaving her children with a babysitter, or when I fail to help support her and her family?
 - vi. When my brother wears a simple, unadorned wedding band, or when I proudly hope my friends will notice the new clothes I am wearing or the new way I combed my hair?
- c. Examples for (2.c) above. Which of these are Scriptural commands, and which are applications? [All are applications.]
 - i. Churches must meet for worship on Sunday.
 - ii. Converts must complete instruction class before being baptized.
 - iii. Baptism must be by immersion/pouring.
 - iv. We must not drink alcohol.
 - v. We must not smoke.
 - vi. We must tithe.
 - vii. We must not vote.
 - viii. We must not own TVs.
 - ix. Weddings must be held in churches, with an ordained minister leading.
 - x. Women must not wear pants. (Gender distinction and modesty, yes; dresses, no. Are pants always men's clothing? Always immodest?)
 - xi. Men must not wear skirts. (South Asian lungi.)
 - Must hold tightly to the Bible, looser to our applications!

G. Legalism and lawlessness:

- 1. *What is the most basic problem with legalism* (treating human traditions as unbending law)?
 - a. Not that it is unloving (though it is), but that it ultimately “sidesteps” and “cancels” the word of God (NLT words).
 - b. “Legalism, at its very heart, is using the law in order to subvert the law” (Rev.

Paul Impena of Community United Reformed Church, online sermon).

- c. Adding multiple requirements of specific applications appears to be honoring God's word, but it ultimately indicates that we don't think God's word is sufficient. We *must* apply God's word; but we must be very, very slow to turn our applications into *requirements* for others.
2. *If we don't understand that the root problem of legalism is disregard for God's word, then we are likely to run from legalism right over to lawlessness.*
 - a. Legalism and lawlessness, though they often bear fruit that looks very different on the surface, actually both grow from the same root: a heart that lacks esteem for God's word.

VI. What Do You Clean? (Exegesis and application of 7:14-23)

A. 7:14

1. A very public announcement (cf. "Hear, O Israel!")
2. Call for understanding.

B. 7:15

1. This parable is a direct, public rebuttal of the Pharisees (note Matt 15:12, which indicates the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying); Jesus is calling on the crowd (and his disciples) to make a decision. Whom will they follow—the Pharisees ("blind leaders of the blind," according to Matt) or Jesus?
2. Parable has two halves, which are explained separately below.
3. Parable alone could be misinterpreted:
 - a. Is Jesus saying that looking at porn can't defile me?
 - b. Is he saying that sin is primarily a problem of our outward actions?

C. 7:17-18a

1. As is typical for Mark, disciples receive additional, private instruction in a house
2. Disciples still don't "get it," despite multiple times when Jesus overturned the Pharisees' rules and demonstrated his own authority over the Law. Consider:
 - a. Are we also sometimes slow to "get" the freedom that Christ brings in the new covenant?
 - b. Are we also slow to understand that sin is rooted in the heart—that no one becomes sinful simply by disobeying the boundary rules of our group, and that no amount of hand-washing can cleanse the heart?
 - c. Note: It is possible to be a disciple (or at least someone who is wanting to follow Jesus, starting to follow him) and yet not understand Christ very well.

D. 7:18b-19

1. "Heart":
 - a. The distinction is between the stomach and the heart (the physical and moral aspects of man); the heart can't be defiled by what goes into the stomach.
 - b. "Heart" also links back to 7:6: "their heart is far from me."
2. "Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him":
 - a. This overturns not only the traditions of the fathers, but also the Torah itself!
 - b. "This seems to conflict with the fact that Jesus clearly accepted Moses's authority as a teacher of the Word of God... Jesus's words here must be interpreted in the context of the entire Gospel of Mark. They must be understood in light of the eschatological [end-of-the-age] fact that the kingdom of God has come... and in light of the authority of Jesus

Christ, the Son of God, to pronounce the will of God... With the coming of the kingdom of God, the period of tutelage under the Law has come to an end. Thus the regulations given by Moses concerning food have given way to the freedom of divine sonship.” (Stein, 345).

3. This teaching was important to Mark's predominantly Gentile audience!
 - a. Cf. Acts 10-11, where Peter's vision of unclean foods made clean likewise symbolizes the full inclusion of the Gentiles as part of the people of God.
 - b. Cf. Mark 7:24-30, where Jesus goes to Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon, and heals a woman's daughter who had an unclean spirit (full inclusion, full purity!) after first testing her faith by giving her a typical Jewish line: “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”
 - i. Cf. Ephesians 2:14-16: “14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down *in his flesh* the dividing wall of hostility 15 *by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances*, that he might create *in himself* one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body *through the cross, thereby killing the hostility*.
 - ii. Christ's sacrificial death abolished the law and united Jew and Gentile.
4. Side note: There are some tough questions about “whatever goes into a person from outside”:
 - a. Can you make a person evil by...
 - i. making him smell a Big Mac (nose)?
 - ii. forcing him to listen to evil music (ears)?
 - iii. pouring alcohol down his throat (mouth)?
 - iv. forcing him to view indecent images (eyes)?
 - b. Ultimately, no!
 - i. A persecuted Christians subjected to continuous godless music isn't automatically defiled.
 - ii. A rape victim who may even experience some pleasure while being abused isn't automatically defiled.
 - iii. A child born with fetal alcohol syndrome isn't automatically defiled.
 - iv. A doctor who sees private parts of people's bodies isn't automatically defiled.
 - v. Adam and Eve weren't evil because they didn't have any clothes on!
 - c. However...
 - i. You sure can lead a sin-filled person into temptation via bodily input!
 - ii. When we use voluntarily use bodily inputs in order to engage in wicked behaviors, we are feeding the evil in our *hearts*. But it is evil that is already there!
 - Even watching porn doesn't make your heart evil. It just reveals that your heart is already filled with evil, and it stirs up the evil already present there.
 - Eve was guilty from the moment she started trusting Satan and doubting God, before she ever reached out her hand to take the forbidden fruit.
 - d. Ultimately, though, Jesus isn't talking here about voluntarily submitting our bodies to feed evil heart desires; he's talking about ritual food laws.
 - i. Mark indicates the intended application when he says “Thus he declared all *foods* clean.”
 - ii. We should not take this parable as reason to be careless about gluttony, movies, or sinful music.
 - iii. (Possible better parallels: No color (red) or sound (drum blow) is intrinsically evil and defiling.)

1. The real problem is found in these verses: sin is already in the heart!
 - a. You don't have to put it there from the outside. Sin is not a germ that is transmitted contagiously from person to person, but a cancer that appears mysteriously within.
 - b. Evil out there is only a problem because evil inside latches onto it.
 - i. “To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled” (Titus 1:15, also in the context of Jewish myths and commands).
 - ii. “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire... What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?... Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 1:14; 4:1, 8b).

2. This heart emphasis is also found elsewhere in Mark:
 - a. Mark 2:6-8: “Now some of the scribes were sitting there, *questioning in their hearts*, “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, “Why do you question these things in your *hearts*?”
 - b. Mark 3:4-5: “And he said to them, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their *hardness of heart*...”
 - c. Mark 4:15: “These are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them [Lit: *their hearts*]
 - d. Mark 6:52: “They did not understand about the loaves, but *their hearts were hardened*.”
 - e. And skipping other references... Mark 12:30: “You shall *love the Lord your God with all your heart* and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”
 - f. Also: consider all the times Jesus cast out evil spirits.

3. Don't skip hastily over this list! This is a description of your heart apart from Christ's redemptive work! (Consider Jesus' application of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount.) Thirteen dirty descriptions:
 - a. One introductory quality: evil thoughts.
 - b. Six actions (all in plural—repeated actions):
 - i. A. sexual immoralities (very general term)
 - ii. B. thefts
 - iii. C. murders
 - iv. A' adulteries
 - v. B' covetings (greeds)
 - vi. C' wickednesses (evils; perhaps a summary of this list)
 - c. Six vices (all in singular):
 - i. Deceit
 - ii. Sensuality (lewdness, licentiousness)

- iii. Envy
- iv. Slander (literally, “blasphemy” of other people)
- v. Pride (arrogance)
- vi. Foolishness (folly; perhaps a summary of this list)

F. Application: What do you clean? Your hands or your heart?

1. Observations:

- a. Our problem isn't eating with dirty hands, but worshiping with dirty hearts.
- b. If our real problem was merely a problem of outward behavior, then we could solve our sin problem with the commandments of men.
- c. Jesus isn't saying that behavior doesn't matter (“by their fruits you shall know them” is still true), but that behavior change isn't enough to make you holy; you need heart change.
- d. Jesus doesn't provide the solution to our heart problem in this passage.
 - i. He clearly shows now NOT to solve our sin problem: If we focus on limiting bodily inputs in one form or another, we will never solve the problem of sin! Colossians 2:20-23 (NLT): “20 You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, 21 “Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!”? 22 Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. 23 These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.”
 - ii. Later Mark records Jesus words: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This points us back to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah:
 - “All we like sheep have gone astray... and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all... by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.” (Is 53:6, 11)
 - iii. Elsewhere the Bible provides a variety of word pictures to describe God's solution to our heart problem:
 - A new heart
 - A washed heart
 - Dying with Christ
 - Being born again / becoming a new creation
 - Being filled with the Spirit
 - Favorite passage: Titus 2:11-14; 3:3-8. Read, if there is time!

2. Questions:

- a. Do our human commandments tend to blind us to the real problem of sin—that sin is in our hearts?
- b. Do our human commandments and our traditions of holy behavior actually make it harder for people to see their need for conversion and experience true heart change?

- i. I was once in a meeting where several experienced church leaders were discussing the difficulty of awakening a sense of modesty (re: physical dress) in their church members. Two of them both suggested that a background of stringent church guidelines makes it more difficult to shepherd a church in a way that addresses heart motivations. The third, when asked, agreed that it is often the people from the most conservative backgrounds that cause the most problems in his church fellowship.
- c. Do our human commandments disrespect Christ and belittle his authority that he exercised in overturning the purity laws, providing purification in his own blood, and breaking down the walls between all believers?
 - i. We have no authority to overturn any of God's commands. Only Jesus does! (He demonstrated this by ending the Mosaic food laws.) Therefore, when we create authoritative traditions that prevent people from obeying God's commands, we are implicitly usurping divine authority and acting as if we are equal to Jesus.
- d. As we try to live above sin, do we rely on the full riches of the salvation that Christ has provided, or do we rely on our human rules? When we want the church to be more holy, do we add rules or do we preach the gospel more clearly?
- e. Do our human commandments, by the way they divide believers into camps, actually *encourage* some of the heart problems Jesus listed here, such as slander and pride?

VII. Summary and final applications

A. Three problems with turning traditions of men into commandments:

- 1. They make us see some of Christ's followers as defiled, and perhaps even enemies (7:1-5).
- 2. They hinder us from teaching and obeying God's commands (7:6-13).
- 3. They can't cleanse us from sin (7:14-23).

B. Review of key application questions:

- 1. **What do you see? Christ at work, or your rules being broken?**
 - a. Do we have eyes to see what Jesus is doing to feed and heal and purify others, or are we so preoccupied with how others violate our applications of Scripture that we are blind to what God is doing?
 - b. Do we allow Jesus to work even if he doesn't always follow our rules?
 - c. Do we allow others to follow Jesus without demanding they also follow us? Or do we only see that they are different from us and thus conclude they must not be following Jesus?
 - i. Quote: "We become accidental Pharisees when we lay down boundary markers that are narrower than the ones laid down by Jesus and then treat people who line up on the wrong side of our markers as if they were spiritual imposters or enemies of the Lord. Our goal may be to protect the flock. But boundary markers that are narrower than the ones Jesus laid down don't protect the flock; they divide the flock." *Osborne, Larry (2012-10-09). Accidental Pharisees: Avoiding Pride, Exclusivity, and the Other Dangers of Overzealous Faith (pp. 142-143). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.*

- d. Can we say with John Coblenz: “I have purposed to rejoice in Jesus wherever I see him”?
- 2. **What do you teach? God's word or your traditions?**
 - a. Does our *application* of one of God's commands hinder us from obeying any other of God's *commands*?
 - b. Are we more grieved when others disregard our traditions than when we disobey God's word?
 - c. Do we find it hard to clearly distinguish between our applications and God's commands?
- 3. **What do you clean? Your heart or your hands?**
 - a. Do our human commandments and our traditions of holy behavior actually make it harder for people to see their need for conversion and experience true heart change?
 - b. Do our human commandments tend to blind us to the real problem of sin—that sin is in our hearts?

C. Closing prayer: Search Me, O God

Search me, O God,
 And know my heart today;
 Try me, O Savior,
 Know my thoughts, I pray.
 See if there be
 Some wicked way in me;
 Cleanse me from every sin
 And set me free.

Lord, take my life,
 And make it wholly Thine;
 Fill my poor heart
 With Thy great love divine.
 Take all my will,
 My passion, self and pride;
 I now surrender, Lord
 In me abide.

I praise Thee, Lord,
 For cleansing me from sin;
 Fulfill Thy Word,
 And make me pure within.
 Fill me with fire
 Where once I burned with shame;
 Grant my desire
 To magnify Thy Name.

O Holy Ghost,
 Revival comes from Thee;
 Send a revival,
 Start the work in me.
 Thy Word declares
 Thou wilt supply our need;
 For blessings now,
 O Lord, I humbly plead.

- J. Edwin Orr