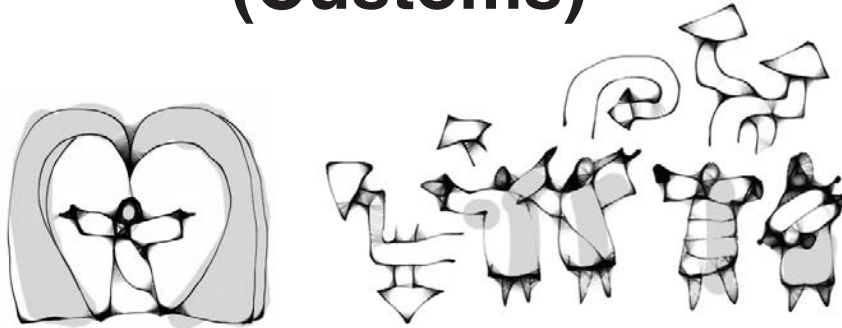


# Christ and Religious Tradition<sup>1</sup> (Customs)



## SABBATH—APRIL 12

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Matthew 23:1–7; Matthew 15:1–6; Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 5:17–20; Romans 10:3.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “ ‘ “These people honor me by what they say. But their hearts are far away from me. Their worship doesn’t [does not] mean anything to me. They teach nothing but human rules” ’ ” (Matthew 15:8, 9, NIV).

### DEFINITIONS

1. tradition—man-made customs (rules) that were passed on from generation to generation for many hundreds of years.
2. scribes—people in the past whose job was to copy manuscripts and books.
3. Pharisees—members of an ancient (very old) Jewish group that followed Jewish religious laws and teachings very strictly.
4. rabbis—people who are trained to make decisions about what is lawful in Judaism, to perform Jewish ceremonies, or to lead a Jewish congregation.

**JOHN WESLEY WAS THE MAN WHO STARTED THE METHODIST CHURCH.** He suggested a person’s religious beliefs are influenced by four things: faith, reason, the Bible, and tradition. But he did not mean that all of these four are equal. He admitted that the Bible was the most important influence. But he also thought that a person’s own faith, ability to think, and religious tradition influence the way that he or she interprets the Bible. If Wesley were brought back to life today, he would be shocked to find that many modern thinkers who believe in his philosophy now think that reason, tradition, or personal opinion are more important than the clear teaching of the Bible.

This week’s lesson studies the religious traditions taught by the scribes<sup>2</sup> and Pharisees.<sup>3</sup> The rabbis<sup>4</sup> who wrote down these traditions greatly respected the Bible. They had not planned for these traditions to be equal to God’s Word (the Bible). But some of their overambitious followers confused the method with the message. In this way, they made human tradition more important than God’s Word.

## SEAT OF MOSES (Matthew 23:1–7)

The “scribes and Pharisees” seem to be two separate groups who just happened to be grouped together. But the scribes were a smaller group of the Pharisees (read Acts 23:9). The Pharisees became a known group during the time of the Greek Empire. They are believed to have come from what was left of a religious Jewish group known as the Hasidim. The Hasidim helped to fight in the Maccabean rebellion (war) against Greece.

The name *Pharisees* comes from the Hebrew word *paras*, which means “to separate.” During a period in the past, many Jews had become influenced by pagan (not holy; not righteous) cultures. To fight these influences, the Pharisees saw it as their duty to make sure that every Jewish male learned the law well. To do this work, the Pharisees created the position of *rabbi*. This word means “my great one” or “my teacher.”

Jesus said, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat” (Matthew 23:2, NKJV). By this Jesus showed that He accepted their positions as teachers of the people. Jesus knew that they had taken the responsibility to make sure that the people learned and obeyed the law well.

**Read Matthew 23:1–7. What was one of Jesus’ biggest problems with the scribes and Pharisees?**

Many verses written in the Bible about the scribes and Pharisees are negative. It is true that many of the scribes and Pharisees (but not all) planned the death of Jesus and the attacks against His followers. Members of these groups seemed to be hiding in corners and behind trees just waiting for people to make mistakes so they could enforce the law against them. This mental picture of a Pharisee is so often found in the Bible that the word *Pharisee* is often connected with *legalist*.<sup>5</sup> As we study this verse closely, we find that Jesus’ big problem with the Pharisees was not their desire to make others keep the law of Moses. Instead, His problem was that the Pharisees themselves were not keeping it. They were being hypocrites—or showing “two faces.” They said one thing but did another. They might do the right thing, but they did it for wrong reasons.

**Read again what Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees. How can we make sure we do not become guilty of the same attitudes (thoughts and feelings)?**



**Pharisees seemed to lay in wait for others to make mistakes so that they could enforce the law against them.**

## DEFINITIONS

5. *legalist*—a person who believes he or she can be saved by keeping the law.

## HUMAN COMMANDMENTS (Matthew 15:1–6)

The scribes and Pharisees “sat in Moses’ seat.” But their authority for religious instruction went beyond the Old Testament. The law that the Pharisees made included Bible interpretations of leading rabbis. These interpretations were not meant to take the Bible’s place. They were meant to support it. At first, these interpretations were taught from mouth to mouth. But later, the scribes began to gather them together in books.

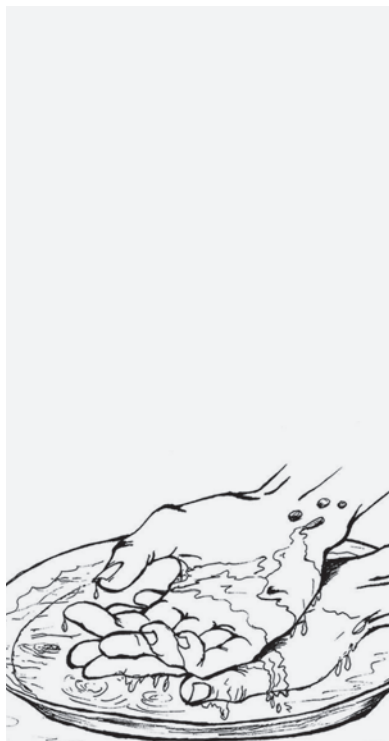
The first book of rabbinic<sup>6</sup> law did not appear until the end of the second century A.D. Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince) published the *Mishnah*.<sup>7</sup> The laws written in the Mishnah are based on about four hundred years of rabbinic discussion. Among the authors are many who lived at the time of Jesus. The best-known rabbis were Hillel and Shammai. There was also Gamaliel, the grandson of Hillel and also Paul’s teacher.

**Read Matthew 15:1–6. What is the problem here? What wrong is Jesus trying to correct?**

In lesson 1, we learned that the rabbinic laws were called *halakah*, which means “to walk.” The rabbis felt that if a person would walk in the ways of the less important laws, they would keep the more important ones automatically. But somewhere along the way, the less important laws began to become more “important.” After a while, it was not easy to tell the difference between the man-made laws and the true laws of the Bible.

It does not appear that Jesus had a problem with the Pharisees having their own rules. But He did have a problem with the less important rules becoming equal to the Bible’s teachings. No human has the authority to create man-made rules and make them equal to the laws of the Bible that have been authorized by God Himself. But this does not mean that groups of believers cannot make rules that help people to live better lives. Useful instruction could help people greatly in keeping the law. But the instruction should never be allowed to take the place of the law itself.

**What rules, traditions, and customs do we as Seventh-day Adventists have that we believe help us to live more faithfully and obediently to the law? Write them down and bring them to class on Sabbath. Ask questions about how they can influence the life of your church group.**



Jesus objected to the Pharisees making their laws higher than God’s.

## DEFINITIONS

6. rabbinic—having to do with the writings and teachings of the rabbis.

7. Mishnah—the published list of laws prepared by the rabbis.

**TRADITIONS OF THE ELDERS (Matthew 15:1, 2)**

As we saw, some of the rabbis paid too much attention to the rules and traditions that were made to help people keep the law of Moses. But the rabbis failed to tell the difference between the true law and their man-made traditions. After a while, the words of the rabbis were accepted as equal to the Bible. People thought they were just as holy. As mentioned in yesterday's lesson, the rabbis who first wrote their teachings did not plan to make them equal to the Bible. But their faithful followers probably saw it as their duty to share these "special" teachings with common people.

**Read again Matthew 15:1, 2. The tradition mentioned here is based on what verse in the first five books of Moses? What is the importance of your answer? Read also Mark 7:3, 4 and Matthew 15:11.**

It would be very difficult for someone to find a Bible verse that commands, "Thou shalt wash thy hands before thou eatest." But this fact did not stop the scribes and Pharisees when they argued with Jesus. They made it clear that Jesus' disciples were not breaking the law of Moses. Instead, they said Jesus' disciples broke the "tradition of the elders." To the Pharisees, this was a terrible offense (crime; breaking of the law).

Health professionals and parents would probably like to give a health or psychological reason for the Pharisees' hand-washing rule. But Bible thinkers believe that the problem was really about ceremonial uncleanness. Clearly, the Pharisees were concerned that as people went about doing their daily business they would touch things that had been defiled (made unclean). So, the Pharisees believed that if the people touched and ate food without first washing their hands, they would make themselves unclean.

Because the Pharisees made their charge against Jesus' disciples instead of Jesus Himself, we might conclude that Jesus did not break the well-known tradition of washing hands (Mark 7:3). Nonetheless, He was well aware that the Pharisees were making a big problem out of something small.

**Read Isaiah 29:13. What crucial biblical principles (important rules) are revealed here? Why are they so important for us to remember?**

**THE PRECEPTS (RULES) OF MEN (Matthew 15:3–6)**

“Making the rules and traditions of men greater than the commandments of God has not stopped. Even among Christians there are churches that uphold the traditions of the church fathers as greater than God’s law. Such churches depend upon human authority. They have made their man-made rules and traditions more important than God’s commands. Men hold on to their traditions and honor their customs. And they feel hatred in their hearts against those who try to show that they are wrong. . . . In place of the authority of the so-called fathers of the church, God commands us to accept the word of the eternal Father, the Lord of heaven and earth.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 398.

**Read Matthew 15:3–6. Next, read Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; Matthew 19:19; and Ephesians 6:2 to help you understand Matthew 15:3–6. What two serious charges does Jesus make against the Pharisees?**

When the Pharisees challenged Jesus over the hand-washing “crime,” they expected Him to answer them right away. But, in His usual way, Jesus asked them a question instead that got to the real heart of the problem. Jesus wanted them to know that the problem was not about hand washing or tithe paying. Instead, He wanted them to understand that the real problem was upholding human standards (rules) above God’s standards.

The Pharisees may have had good reasons for their actions. But God does not ask us to love Him according to our own set of rules. It was good that the Pharisees were concerned about discipline and holy living. But they should never have allowed their rules to become greater than the will of God. The Pharisees should have remembered that the 613 laws written down in the law of Moses worked together, not against one another. None of the laws were meant to undo any of the other laws. But the Pharisees were stubborn in following the “tradition of the elders.” Their stubborn ways challenged the Word of God (Matthew 15:6). No doubt, seeing themselves as the protectors of the law, they must have been shocked by the claim that they were really breaking the law. They made the law weaker by the very traditions that they thought helped people to keep the law better!

**“TOO MUCH” RIGHTEOUSNESS (Matthew 5:20)**

**Read Matthew 5:17–20. How does this week’s lesson help us to understand what Jesus’ warning in Matthew 5:20 could mean? Read also Romans 10:3.**

If we do not read carefully, we could misinterpret (fail to understand) Matthew 5:20 as an invitation for us to “out-Pharisee the Pharisees.” This means doing what the Pharisees do, only doing it more.

But is this what Jesus is saying? Thankfully for us, we can have the correct answer. Yesterday’s study showed that the scribes and Pharisees put traditional laws above the law of God. Jesus had to tell the Pharisees that their actions did not follow the plain Word of God. Monday’s study also showed that the scribes and Pharisees probably meant well in their teaching, but many of them lived two-faced lives.

So, it is not hard to see the true reason for Jesus’ warning. Jesus could have pointed to what He had warned of in another verse: “Do not break even one of the least important commandments. And do not teach others to break them. If you do, you will be called the least important person in heaven’ ” (Matthew 5:19, NIV). The Pharisees were so focused on the man-made laws that they broke the law of God. Their righteousness (holiness) was based on their own efforts. And such efforts were faulty. Isaiah had long said that human righteousness is the same as dirty rags (Isaiah 64:6).

The kind of righteousness that Jesus encourages us to have is one that starts in the heart. In the hand-washing event, Jesus pointed to the Pharisees’ error by quoting from Isaiah 29:13: “These people . . . honor me by what they say. But their hearts are far from me’ ” (NIV). The righteousness that God seeks goes deeper than what is on the surface. It begins inside the heart.

Jesus calls for a righteousness that goes beyond what the Pharisees themselves thought that they had. The righteousness that is important cannot be received by checking off every item on a task list. It can be received only by faith in Jesus Christ and by claiming His righteousness for ourselves. It is a righteousness that comes from a complete surrender of a person who admits that he or she needs Jesus as his or her Substitute and Example.

**Read Romans 10:3. How does this verse help us to understand what true righteousness really means?**



**Many of the scribes and Pharisees led two-faced lives.**



**The Pharisees were so focused on man-made laws that they broke God’s law.**

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** For more information on this week’s topic, read Ellen G. White, “Tradition,” pages 395–398; “Woes [Judgments] on the Pharisees,” pages 610–620, in *The Desire of Ages*. Also read Matthew 23.

“Let all who accept human authority, the customs of the church, or the traditions of the fathers, listen to the warning given in the words of Christ, ‘Their worship doesn’t [does not] mean anything to me. They teach nothing but human rules.’ ”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 398.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① What are some of the man-made traditions that we as Seventh-day Adventists follow? Why is it important to recognize them as man-made? Why are traditions important? What part do they have in the life of our community? Which traditions have meaning for the world church? Which ones are important only for the local church?

② “Believers have often let the enemy work through them at the very time when they should have been fully faithful to God and to His work. Unknowingly they have wandered far from the way of righteousness. By showing the negative spirit of criticism, faultfinding, and false pride, they have grieved away the Spirit of God. And they have greatly slowed down the work of God’s messengers.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies<sup>8</sup> for the Church*, volume 9, page 125. How does one unknowingly wander far from the way of righteousness? What steps can a person take to prevent himself or herself from being trapped in a self-righteous rut?

### DEFINITIONS

8. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.

③ Look back on the order of the church service. Why does your church have that special order? What is the meaning of each item in the church service (for example, opening prayer, hymns, pastoral prayer, and so on)? What lessons can you learn from the church service that help to show just how much tradition is built into our faith? At the same time we need to ask: Just because it is tradition, is it bad?