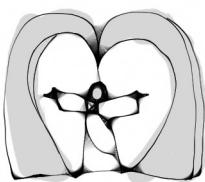


Christ and Religious Tradition



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Matt. 23:1–7, Matt. 15:1–6, Isa. 29:13, Matt. 5:17–20, Rom. 10:3.

Memory Text: “ ‘ “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” ” (Matthew 15:8, 9, RSV).

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, suggested that one's theology is influenced by four factors: faith, reason, Scripture, and tradition. He didn't mean, however, that all sides are equally authoritative. He acknowledged that the Bible was foundational, but he also recognized that one's individual faith, ability to reason, and religious tradition affect the way in which the Bible is interpreted. If Wesley were brought back to life today, he would be shocked to discover that many modern theologians in the Wesleyan tradition (and other traditions, as well) now value reason, tradition, or personal opinion over the clear teaching of Scripture.

This week's lesson investigates the religious traditions upon which the scribes and Pharisees based many of their teachings. The rabbis who originally penned these traditions greatly respected the Scriptures and had no intention for these traditions to be elevated to the status of God's Word. However, some of their zealous disciples confused the method with the message and in doing so shifted the focus from God's written revelation to human tradition.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 19.

Seat of Moses

While the “scribes and Pharisees” appear to be two separate groups who just happened to be lumped together, the scribes were likely a subset of the Pharisees (*see Acts 23:9*). The Pharisees became a visible group during the time of the Grecian Empire. They are believed to be the remnants of a pious Jewish sect, known as the *Hasidim*, who helped to fight in the Maccabean revolution against Greece.

The name *Pharisees* is derived from the Hebrew *paras*, which means “to separate.” In an age when many Jews had become greatly influenced by pagan cultures, the Pharisees saw it as their duty to ensure that every Jewish male was taught the law. To accomplish this task, they established the position of *rabbi*, which literally means “my great one” or “my teacher.”

In saying that the “‘scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat,’ ” Jesus acknowledged their positions as teachers of the people (*Matt. 23:2, 3, NKJV*). After all, at least they had taken the responsibility to ensure that the people were instructed in the way of the law.

Read Matthew 23:1–7. From these verses, what was one of Jesus’ biggest problems with the scribes and Pharisees?

Most of the references to the scribes and Pharisees in the Gospels are negative, and considering the complicity that many (but not all) had in the death of Jesus and the persecution of His followers, that negativity was well deserved. Members of these groups seemed to be lurking around corners and hiding behind trees just waiting for people to make mistakes so they could enforce the law against them. This image of the Pharisee is so frequent in Scripture that the word is often used as a synonym for *legalist*. As we look closely at this text, we find that Jesus’ big problem with the Pharisees was not so much that they wanted others to keep the law of Moses but that they themselves were not keeping it. They were hypocritical—they said one thing, but did another—and even when they did the right thing, they did it for wrong reasons.

Read again what Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees. How can we make sure that we don’t become guilty of similar attitudes?

Human Commandments

Although the scribes and Pharisees “sat in Moses’ seat,” their source of authority for religious instruction extended beyond the Old Testament. The law that the Pharisees utilized consisted of biblical interpretations of leading rabbis. These interpretations were not intended to replace the Scriptures but to complement them. At first they circulated orally; later the scribes began to assemble them into books.

The first official publication of rabbinic law did not appear until the end of the second century A.D., when Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince) published the *Mishnah*. The laws recorded in the Mishnah reflect about four centuries of rabbinic interpretation. Included among the contributing rabbis are many who lived at the time of Jesus, the most notable being Hillel and Shammai. There was also Gamaliel, the grandson of Hillel and also Paul’s teacher.

Read Matthew 15:1–6. What is the controversial issue here? What error is Jesus seeking 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 minor laws, they would keep the major ones by default. However, somewhere along the way the minor laws began to take on major status, and after a while it was difficult to distinguish the traditional from the biblical.

It does not appear that Jesus had a problem with the Pharisees having their own rules. However, He did have a problem with the elevation of these rules to the status of “doctrine.” No human has the authority to create religious restrictions and elevate them to the level of divine mandate. But this is not to say that groups of believers are prohibited from creating regulations that help to govern community behavior. Practical instruction could help people greatly in keeping the law. However, the instruction should never be allowed to take the place of the law itself.

As Seventh-day Adventists, what rules, traditions, and customs do we 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, asking questions about the role that they play in the life of your faith community.

Traditions of the Elders

As we saw, some of the rabbis paid so much attention to the rules and traditions created to assist in the keeping of the law of Moses that they failed to distinguish between the two. After a while, the words of the rabbis gained canonical status; people thought they were as binding as Scripture. In all probability, when the rabbis originally wrote their commentaries, they had no intention of adding to the pages of Scripture. However, their devoted disciples probably saw it as their duty to share these unique interpretations with the general populace.

Read again Matthew 15:1, 2. The tradition is based on what text in the first five books of Moses? What is the significance of your answer? See also Mark 7:3, 4 and Matt. 15:11.

One is hard pressed to find a biblical text that commands, “Thou shalt wash thy hands before thou eatest.” However, this injunction would not have surprised the scribes and Pharisees as they confronted Jesus, for they made it clear that the disciples were not in violation of Mosaic law but the “tradition of the elders.” The intensity with which they asked the question makes it seem that, for the Pharisees, this was a serious religious violation.

Health professionals and parents would probably like to provide a hygienic or psychological rationale for the Pharisees’ apparent obsessive compulsion with hand washing. However, scholars believe that the issue was really about ceremonial uncleanness. Apparently, the Pharisees were concerned that as people went about their daily business they would touch items that had been defiled. Consequently, if they ate without washing, they would contaminate themselves ceremonially by touching the food.

Given the fact that they levied their charge against Jesus’ disciples, we might conclude that Jesus Himself was not in violation of the well-known tradition (*Mark 7:3*). Nonetheless, He was well aware that the Pharisees were majoring in minors.

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

The Precepts of Men

“The substitution of the precepts of men for the commandments of God has not ceased. Even among Christians are found institutions and usages that have no better foundation than the traditions of the fathers. Such institutions, resting upon mere human authority, have supplanted those of divine appointment. Men cling to their traditions, and revere their customs, and cherish hatred against those who seek to show them their error. . . . In place of the authority of the so-called fathers of the church, God bids us accept the word of the eternal Father, the Lord of heaven and earth.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 398.

Read Matthew 15:3–6 but in the context of Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16, Matthew 19:19, and Ephesians 6:2. What two serious charges does Jesus make against the Pharisees?

When the Pharisees confronted Jesus about the hand-washing incident, they expected Him to respond directly to their charge. However, in His unique style, Jesus confronted them with a question that got to the real heart of the issue. Jesus wanted them to know that the problem was not about hand washing or tithe paying but about the elevation of human standards over divine standards. The Pharisees could provide a logical explanation for their stance on hand washing. Undoubtedly, they probably also reasoned that their channeling of resources to the cause of God rather than to their parents was an expression of their unparalleled love for God.

Although the Pharisees may have had logical motives for their actions, God does not expect humans to love Him on their own terms. It was good that they were concerned about discipline and holy living, but that concern should never eclipse the will of God. The Pharisees should have recalled that the 613 laws recorded in the law of Moses were harmonious and not contradictory. None of the laws sought to supplant another. However, their insistence in following the “tradition of the elders” invalidated the Word of God (*Matt. 15:6*), at least as far as they themselves were concerned. No doubt, seeing themselves as the protectors of the law, they must have been shocked, even scandalized, by the claim that they were actually violating it, even making it of “none effect” by the very traditions that they thought were helping people to keep the law better!

Excessive Righteousness (*Matt. 5:20*)

Read Matthew 5:17–20. In the context of this week's lesson, what are some of the ways that Jesus' admonition in Matthew 5:20 could be understood? See also Rom. 10:3.

If read in isolation, Matthew 5:20 could be seen as an invitation to out-Pharisee the Pharisees; that is, do what they do, only do it more.

But is this what Jesus is saying? Fortunately, the answer to that question is within our reach. Yesterday's lesson pointed out that it was not unusual for the scribes and Pharisees to elevate traditional laws over the law of God. Jesus had to tell them that their actions in effect invalidated the plain Word of God. Sunday's study also mentioned that, although the scribes and Pharisees probably had good content in their teaching, many of them lived hypocritical lives.

Given this background, it is not hard to see the true sentiment behind Jesus' statement. He very well could have been referring to that which He had elsewhere warned about: “‘Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven’” (*Matt. 5:19, NIV*). The Pharisees were so focused on the laws of human origin that they blatantly broke the law of God. Their righteousness was based on their own efforts and, as such, was defective. Isaiah had long declared that human righteousness is nothing but filthy rags (*Isa. 64:6*).

The kind of righteousness that Jesus promotes is one that starts in the heart. In the hand-washing incident, Jesus pointed to the Pharisees' error by quoting from Isaiah 29:13: “‘These people . . . honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’” (*NIV*). The righteousness that God seeks goes deeper than visible action.

Jesus calls for a righteousness that exceeds what the Pharisees themselves thought that they possessed. The righteousness that counts is not obtained by checking off every item on a task list; it can be gained only by faith in Jesus Christ and by claiming His righteousness for ourselves. It is a righteousness that comes from a complete surrender of self and a passionate realization that we need Jesus as our Substitute and Example.

Read Romans 10:3. How does this text help us to see what true righteousness is all about?

Further Study: For more information on this week's topic, read Ellen G. White, "Tradition," pp. 395–398; "Woes on the Pharisees," pp. 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, take heed to the warning conveyed in the words of Christ, 'In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.' "—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 398.

Discussion Questions:

- ① What are some of the traditions that we as Seventh-day Adventists follow? Why is it important to recognize them as such? Why are traditions important, and what role do they have in the life of our community? Which ones have universal significance, and which ones are based on local and cultural factors?
- ② "Believers have not infrequently allowed the enemy to work through them at the very time when they should have been wholly consecrated to God and to the advancement of His work. Unconsciously they have wandered far from the way of righteousness. Cherishing a spirit of criticism and faultfinding, of pharisaical piety and pride, they have grieved away the Spirit of God and have greatly retarded the work of God's messengers."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 125. How does one "unconsciously" wander far from the way of righteousness? What steps can a person take to avoid getting trapped in a self-righteous rut?
- ③ Reflect on the order of the divine worship service in your church. Why does your church have that particular order? What is the meaning of each item in the service (for example, invocation, doxology, pastoral prayer, and so on)? What lessons can you learn from the church service that help to reveal just how much tradition is interwoven in our faith? At the same time we need to ask: just because it's tradition, and nothing else, is it bad?

Making a Difference

When I was a child, my family lived near the Seventh-day Adventist church in our town in northern Namibia. Mother took us to church, though we weren't Adventists. I liked church. On Sabbath afternoon, we'd go to Himba villages to sing and talk to them about God. Then when I was eight years old, we moved away, and I couldn't go to church anymore.

As I grew up, I began bullying other kids at school. I knew it was wrong, but I enjoyed the power. My parents kept me busy selling things in the market so I would stay out of trouble. One Saturday, I slipped away from work to play soccer. I saw the Adventist church near the field and watched the children walking to church. They were dressed nicely and seemed so happy. I wished I could be more like those children.

I left the soccer field and walked to the church. I recognized a few of the kids who went to my school. I expected these kids to treat me badly, but they didn't. They welcomed me into their group. When church started, they invited me to join them. I was embarrassed. My clothes were old, and I didn't have shoes. But no one cared.

During church one of the leaders announced that the new Pathfinder Club needed more members. I didn't know what Pathfinders was, but it sounded like fun, so I asked to join. The leader invited me to the meeting that same afternoon.

I told my mother that I had attended church and wanted to go back. She nodded. In time I took my younger sisters with me. Then I invited my cousin. She started attending Pathfinders and eventually came to church.

I gave my life to God. Mother sees how God is changing me, and she's glad. Others have noticed too. I no longer bully people. God has shown me how the kids I had bullied felt when I treated them badly. Now I try to be kind to others and encourage other kids.

God has given me a great job! I help record and edit Bible stories for the Himba people, most of whom can't read. I'm happy that God is letting me make a difference in other people's lives. My mother is Himba, and I want to help teach the Himba that Jesus loves them and wants them to live with Him forever.

A recent Thirteenth Sabbath Offering is helping us to record more stories to reach the Himba in a way they can understand and respond to. Thank you!



WILLEM HIFIKEPUNYE is a student serving God in Opuwo in northern Namibia.