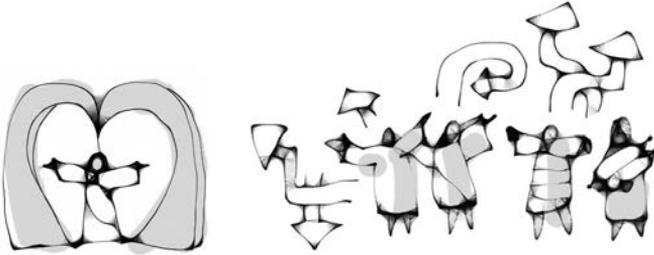


# Christ *and* Religious Tradition



## 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?**

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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?**

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## 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?

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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.**

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## 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.*

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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?**

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## 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?

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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.

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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?

## *The Lesson in Brief*

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► **Key Text:** *Matthew 15:8, 9*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Understand that religious tradition can never replace God’s law.

**Feel:** Be convicted of the superiority of God’s law over tradition.

**Do:** Let the Holy Spirit promote the kind of righteousness that starts in the heart.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Human Standards and Laws Can Never Be Elevated Over Divine Standards and Laws.**

- A** How did the religious traditions, which were originally introduced with good intentions, come to be elevated to the status of God’s Word?
- B** How did Jesus differentiate between God’s law and human traditions?
- C** Why was Jesus so critical of the teachings of the Pharisees?
- D** How did the traditions that were meant to help people better keep the law actually make it of “none effect”?

**II. Feel: God’s Law Trumps Human Tradition.**

- A** How can we avoid an attitude of “better than thou” when dealing with others who do not follow all the precepts of God’s law?
- B** How can I let go of the security of a known routine or ritual to more closely follow the precepts of God’s law?

**III. Do: Righteousness That Starts in Heart and Home**

- A** Rabbi means “my great one” or “my teacher.” How can a teacher help his or her students to think for themselves?
- B** How can we avoid elevating our interpretations of God’s laws to the same level as the law itself?

► **Summary:** While tradition has its place in the church, no human has the authority to create religious restrictions and elevate them to the level of divine law.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Matthew 15:8, 9*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** While tradition has its place in the church, no human has the authority to create religious restrictions and elevate them to the level of divine law.

Watch a child under the age of one open a gift. More likely than not, the child will be fascinated by the wrapping and will be very happy to play with the crackling paper and sample the bright ribbons, while completely ignoring the gift inside the paper. Little children sometimes even cry when the paper is taken away and seem to prefer it to the gift it enwrapped.

Many people see Jesus' conflicts with the teachers of the law as evidence of Jesus' disregard for the law. As we study this week, we see that, rather than disregarding the law, Jesus was intent on stripping away the "wrappings" of religious tradition and presenting the law to the people as the true gift of God, which reached into the very motives of their hearts.

**Opening Activity:** Imagine that a new stop sign has been placed in your town. Your job would be to see that vehicles stopped at the stop sign. Discuss the different options available, such as warning lights before the stop sign, a driver education course, advertising on the local media, having someone sit there watching for offenders, or different punishments for not stopping. Which method or methods do you think would be most effective in helping people stop at the sign? Why?

**Discuss:** We think of contamination as something coming from the outside. If we touch or eat something contaminated with bacteria, we will get sick. Jesus taught that spiritual contamination was different. What was it, and where did it come from according to Jesus (*Matt. 15:10–20*)?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

#### Bible Commentary

Jesus' and the early church's struggle with tradition marks an important turning point in salvation history. The "wrappings" of tradition had clouded the perception of Jews when it came to divine law and the Messiah.

Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the nascent Christian church made small steps to fully comprehend the significance of the

Messiah's coming and mission. Led by the Spirit, they, slowly but surely, disassembled long-held traditions and made theological breakthroughs that were not always easy. In the following section, we will look at two crucial moments in which tradition and Scripture collided in the theological growth of the early church.

**Consider This:** What strategies did the early Christian church use to untangle the connection between God's law and human tradition? How can these strategies be helpful in our discussion of the relationship between law and lifestyle?

### I. The Temple and the Early Church (*Review Acts 2:46, 47, and Acts 3 with your class.*)

Jerusalem was not only the center of Judaism but also the birthplace of Christianity. After the ascension of Jesus, the apostles and other disciples were in the temple daily, while at the same time breaking bread in smaller house settings (*Acts 2:46, 47*). The context suggests prayer and perhaps the reading (and interpretation) of Scripture—something that was more typical for a synagogue than the temple, which was the center for sacrifices and offerings. What was most significant, however, was the public nature of their prayer and study, which caused others to take a second look and join the group.

Acts 3:1 notes that Peter and John went to the temple at the hour of prayer. The temple was the central place of worship for Jews living in Jerusalem, but one wonders how the early Christians dealt with sacrificial service and the daily sacrifices for Israel (or *tamid* in Hebrew). Following the healing of the paralytic in Acts 3:2–10, the two disciples use the excitement generated by the miracle to preach another evangelistic sermon, which is full of quotes from the Old Testament (*Acts 3:11–26*). Following their arrest by the temple leadership and their defense before the Sanhedrin, the disciples are “further threatened” and then let go (*Acts 4:21*). How did John and Peter and the others relate to this prohibition that the highest Jewish authority had pronounced? Humanly speaking, the humble fishermen should easily have been cowered into obedience or at least silenced. Yet, nothing like this happened. Their theological paradigm had been changed, and, empowered by the Spirit, they proclaimed the message of the risen Christ with boldness (*vs. 31*). Instead of continuing to uphold the temple as the center of Jewish theology, they understood that the Lamb that had been slain, Jesus, the Christ, would have to be their theological center. The temple had become a convenient place to preach and reach the masses, but it had lost its theological significance and uniqueness.

**Consider This:** What strategies did the early Christian church use to untangle the connection between God's law and human tradition? Can these strategies

be helpful in our discussion of the relationship between law and lifestyle?

## II. The Early Church and Gentiles (*Review Acts 6:1–7 and Acts 10 with your class.*)

A second important change in the thinking of the early church occurred regarding its attitude toward non-Jews (or Gentiles). Jews living in the first century A.D. were not supposed to enter the home of a Gentile; it would result in their ceremonial impurity. Jesus Himself had limited His ministry to a predominantly Jewish audience—most likely because He wanted to avoid prejudice and because the gospel first needed to be preached to God’s covenant people (*Dan. 9:24, Rom. 1:16*).

The early church was still a predominantly Jewish group (compare the reference to the “Hellenists” that led to the election of deacons with a Greek background, noted in Acts 6:1–7). They preach in the temple of Jerusalem (where mostly Jews and proselytes would worship) and share the message of Jesus with those in Jerusalem. Philip, one of the newly appointed deacons (*Acts 6:1–7*), is the first to move outside the comfort zone of Judaism. Traveling to Samaria (where Samaritans lived!), he preaches the gospel to the crowds. Many heed his message and are convicted by the accompanying miracles (*Acts 8:4–8*). Later on, we find Philip on a road from Jerusalem to Gaza, conversing with an Ethiopian courtier—most likely a proselyte to Judaism—who is reading from the scroll of Isaiah (*vss. 26–39*). Having understood the explanations of the suffering Messiah as a reference to Jesus Christ, the Ethiopian courtier is ready to be baptized. Philip continues to preach in the non-Jewish regions of Palestine and ends up in Caesarea, where he is known as Philip the evangelist (*Acts 21:8, 9*).

While Philip had dealt with a Jewish proselyte and Samaritans (who had some connections to Jews, even though they were not highly appreciated), Peter needed direct divine intervention to help him cross the high threshold of tradition that kept the early church from actively preaching to non-Jews. Acts 10 describes the amazing story of two visions, one given to a Roman centurion and one given to a Jewish fisherman, and the mighty workings of the Spirit. It is remarkable to remember that this was God-appointed and not moved by a committee or a management board. As Peter prays on the roof of a home in Joppa, he sees in a vision a great sheet full of different animals coming down from heaven. In his vision, Peter hears a heavenly voice: “Kill and eat” (*Acts 10:13*). He vehemently opposes this proposition, for the sheet contained both clean and unclean animals. Three times this sequence replays in Peter’s vision, and then we find Peter wondering about the meaning of the vision.

This meaning became immediately clear when the messengers of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, knocked on the door and requested Peter to visit their master in Caesarea. Peter had nearly two days to ponder the meaning of the vision, and when he finally meets the Roman centurion with a house full of Gentiles eager to hear the Word, it all becomes clear. Mission transcends national and cultural boundaries and traditions.

**Consider This:** What steps were needed to convince and convict Peter about the importance of preaching to Gentiles? Read Acts 10 carefully and note key points.

### ►STEP 3—Apply

#### Thought Questions:

- ① The influence of the rabbis was not always negative. Look at Acts 5:27–39. What basis did Gamaliel use for his reasoning? What was the effect on the council?
- ② In Britain, there is a saying, “take care of the pennies, and the pounds will take care of themselves.” Do you think that if a person could focus on, for example, lifestyle issues, then the major issues such as the Ten Commandments could be kept by default? Argue your case carefully.
- ③ In most ancient cultures, the wisdom and experience of older people was honored and treasured. Their advice was followed, and traditions and values were passed on through subsequent generations. In our modern world, we seem to have little time or place for our elders or traditions. Do you think this is a trend that Jesus would support in the area of religion? Why, or why not? (Think of His treatment of the teachings of the elders in Matthew 15.)

#### Application Questions:

- ① Friendship is a two-way street. In order for us to have influence with others, we need to get to know them. How can we make friends with non-believers and nurture these friendships without letting ourselves be sucked into their world?
- ② Jesus said, “ ‘That unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven’ ” (*Matt. 5:20, NKJV*). What hope do we have of making it into heaven?
- ③ The rabbis who originally penned the traditions had great respect for Scripture and had no intention of their writings being used to shift the focus from God’s Word to human tradition. What practical steps can we take to ensure that we do not let great Bible teachers, preachers, or pastors take the place of our personal connection with God’s Word?

### ►STEP 4—Create

**Activity:** Imagine that you are a missionary in the territory of an unentered group of people. You want to begin a worship service. What aspects of your current Sabbath worship traditions would you keep, and which ones would you change? Why?