

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Mark 7:1-13 (read vv.1-5) “The Basis of Christian Belief & Practice”

Intro. There could hardly be a greater contrast between chapter 6 and chapter 7. In chapter 6 Jesus is still very popular, especially after He fed over 5,000 people. Here in chapter 7 He is facing His critics. Some religious leaders from Jerusalem caught up with Jesus and His disciples. They were ministering somewhere in Galilee, & they took time to eat, perhaps while they were traveling to their next destination. At this point in the ministry of Jesus, the religious leaders were openly hostile toward the Lord and His ministry. Why was this hostility? First, this hostility was because of jealousy. Jesus was attracting larger crowds than any Rabbi in Israel. Secondly, Jesus did not support or endorse much of the teaching of the religious leaders. At times, Jesus would even openly declare that the religious leaders were like the blind leading the blind. These leaders resented it when our Lord openly rejected their authority. They also did not like the fact that Jesus associated with tax collectors and “sinners.” They had even begun to plot His death. But they needed some charge to justify their murder of Jesus, so that is why they followed Him.

Well, the disciples started eating some bread, perhaps bread left over from the feeding of the 5000. But they did not first wash their hands. Perhaps water was not even readily available at that time as they traveled. Yet v.2 says, “They found fault” (cf. Lk. 11:38). There will always be faultfinders in a group. In a church crowd the faultfinders think that is their spiritual gift! There are those who have an eye to find fault, and they rarely notice what is good in a person, or in an organization. Are you a faultfinder? Remember, unless you are in a position of authority over another person, you are to leave judgment to those who are in authority, beginning with God Himself.

Well, they found fault because not only the Pharisees, but most all of the Jews practiced ceremonial washing before meals. This was a firmly entrenched tradition passed down from their elders. And in v.5 they asked Jesus about this alleged transgression. They accused Him of allowing His disciples to transgress. They felt for sure their accusation against Jesus would stick.

Who was right, anyway? Was Jesus right in His teachings? Or were the religious leaders right in their teaching? We face a similar situation today. There are so many religions that claim to teach the truth. America has over 350 sects and cults, and most claim the Bible as a source of their doctrine. Even within Christianity there are many different denominations. Though we often agree on many doctrines, there are quite a few other doctrines that we disagree on. Even among Baptists there can be many differences in doctrine & practice. So what do we do? Are we doomed to merely speculate on what’s right, and hope for the best?

Well, I believe this passage of Scripture gives some guidance which the Jews should have followed. And certainly we Christians should follow the teachings of Christ in this regard. I hope you will be able to decide from this passage what is truth, and how we can best know the truth.

Now the first main point I want to make from my text is this:

## I. WE NEED THE RIGHT SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

Any time there is a disagreement about anything, you need to turn to a good source of authority to resolve the conflict.

If you disagree with someone over a definition of a word, then you should go to a good, authoritative dictionary and that should settle the argument. If you disagree with someone regarding what the temperature is, you can settle the argument with a good thermometer. In any realm of knowledge & truth, you need a good source of authority.

That is certainly true when it comes to spiritual truth. Let me give you a religious example of the problem we face here. Suppose someone says, "I don't believe there is a hell." Then I say, "How do you know there *isn't* a hell." "Well, I just can't believe that a loving God would send anyone to hell." Then I ask, "How do you know God is a *loving* God?" "Well, I don't know; that is just what I have always been taught." Actually, you believe that God is love based on the Bible. So such a person is getting their beliefs from two different sources of authority. They believe God is love based on the Bible, but they believe God doesn't send anyone to hell based on their own human reason. Yet which authority in this example is their highest authority? Obviously, such a person accepts biblical authority as long as it doesn't contradict their ultimate authority, which is their own human reason!

Is human reason a reliable & authoritative source of authority? Well that question leads me to my next point:

## II. DON'T RELY ON THE WRONG SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

There are several different sources of authority that people turn to. However, when it comes to spiritual truth, I don't believe you can rely on the wrong sources of authority that I'm about to present. Let's first deal with the source of authority I just mentioned:

A. Human Reason - Many people trust their intellect to lead them into the truth. But is human reason reliable when it comes to spiritual truth? According to the Bible, the answer is "No."

You see, Prov. 3:5 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding." Because man is a sinner, we cannot trust our own ideas and thoughts about God & spiritual truth. That's why the Bible says, "There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof is death" (Prov. 16:25). In Isa. 55:8 God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." So you see, you can't rely upon reason to determine spiritual truth.

Furthermore, human reason is just another opinion. Trusting in personal opinion is an exercise in futility. After all, how could hundreds of conflicting opinions all be right?

B. The World – You can't rely upon talk show hosts on the left or right to guide you into spiritual truth. Just because an author has sold over a million copies of a book does not mean they are an authority on spiritual truth. 1 John 4:5 indicates that false teachers can be very popular with the world. And just because a so-call "expert" with a Ph.D. says something, that doesn't make it true, especially when it comes to spiritual truth.

Furthermore, you can't rely upon:

C. Science – Science is given a lot of weight in modern society. But is science a reliable authority when it comes to knowing truth about God? No! We cannot use our 5 senses, or rely on scientific experimentation, for God is Spirit (Jn. 4:24). Only at certain times in biblical times did God choose to manifest Himself to human senses. We cannot rely on this as a source of authority today. God demands that we have faith. He will not subject Himself to scientific experimentation.

Furthermore, we cannot rely on science in many realms of truth because man is a sinner by nature. You see, the scientist investigates & performs experiments, but interprets the data with a bias. Some interpret the data with a naturalistic bias, and quite honestly, the scientist who believes in God will interpret the data with their own bias.

D. Religious Experience - Some people assume that their religious experience must have been from God, and that it was a confirming sign from heaven of some doctrine or belief. They may speak in tongues, or have a dream, get some wonderful feeling. But are such experiences trustworthy guides of truth or authoritative revelations from God? No! You can't trust in experiences. The Bible teaches that Satan is a deceiver. If God permits, He can give you an experience which will deceive you. The Bible warns that this will especially be true in the last days. Read the book of Revelation. Religious experiences are wonderful, but I would not trust in them alone.

Now the main unreliable source of spiritual truth that is dealt with in our text of Scripture is:

E. Religious Tradition - 5 times in these verses Jesus makes reference to traditions. These are doctrines & practices that have been passed down from generation to generation. Some traditions are biblical, & should be followed. Paul wrote in 2 Thess. 2:15, "hold the traditions which you were taught...." However, there he was talking about the *biblical* traditions they were taught. On the other hand, when I speak of traditions in this context, I am talking about doctrines & practices that are not clearly taught in the Word of God.

In the case of the Jews, a class of legal experts, whom we know as the Scribes, came into being in the 4th & 5th centuries before Christ. Their intentions were probably good. They wanted the Law amplified, expanded, & applied to every possible situation in life. So with the help of oral traditions that had been passed down, they wrote down & issued thousands of little rules and regulations.

Now our text gives an example of one of the traditional regulations that Jews typically followed. In v.3 we read, "For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders." Now this tradition was not primarily for hygiene. Rather, this washing was mainly for a ceremonial religious reason. They would dip their hands in water, and hold their fingers up, and make sure the water dripped down to the wrists. They would also rub each fist into the opposite palm. That's one likely meaning of the word (*pugme*-fist) translated "in a special way."

They did not stop there. In v.4 we read, "When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash...." In their view, any contact with a heathen, even the touch of his clothing, might involve defilement. So after going to the market place, where Gentiles might be, they would wash, or literally *baptize* their whole bodies, lest they be contaminated. How would you like it if someone always took a bath after being with you? Then the last of v.4 says, "And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches." They would wash all kinds of vessels as well (v.4). Earthen vessels that had contracted impurity were to be broken; those of wood, horn, glass, or brass were immersed in water.

Now look at v.5, "Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, 'Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?'" Evidently Jesus did not teach or require His disciples to follow the traditional practice of ceremonial hand washing,

& He was criticized for it. Who's right? Jesus & His disciples did not view tradition as authoritative. Yet the Jews did.

Jesus took this opportunity to rebuke religious leaders who hold up human traditions as authoritative. The disciples were not the "dirty dozen." They were simply not bound by human tradition. And Jesus points out three main problems with criticizing people for not following religious traditions.

First, often religious traditions are not even biblical. Notice what Jesus says about this in the last of v.7, "Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." Jesus is saying that these traditions came from men, not God. This particular handwashing tradition is nowhere spelled out in the Law of Moses. Only the priests (Ex. 30:19-21; 40:31), those who had a discharge (Lev. 15:11), & the elders (Dt. 21:6-7) were required to wash their hands, & then only on certain occasions. There were other types of cleansing prescribed by the Law, mainly to illustrate our need to be cleansed of sin. Yet the Jews added to God's law by requiring the hand-washing ceremony before every meal for all Jews. They started off in essence making traditional applications of the law of equal weight to the Law itself.

Before we criticize someone for not following some religious tradition, we should stop & consider if it is even biblical. And just because we Baptists have been doing something for many years doesn't make it biblical. We should examine our church traditions in the light of God's Word, and to be courageous enough to make changes when those traditions no longer serve a good purpose, and especially if a tradition is actually contrary to the Word of God. Yet we often continue traditions without knowing why. We just say, "We've always done it that way."

Second, we tend to elevate religious traditions above the authority of the Word of God! Jesus said in v.8, "For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men..." Too often, their traditions were in conflict with the Word of God, yet they would chose to uphold tradition as most important. The word translated "holding" (*krateo*) indicates a powerful grip on something.<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees were zealots when it came to observing & holding on to their own traditions. In fact, they had such a strong grip on the traditions that they would "leave" the commandments of God to cling to these traditions. As we see here, it is just as easy to destroy the authority of God's Word by addition as by subtraction.

Jesus gave an example of how tradition even trumped the Word of God. He began by saying in v.9, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition." He was being sarcastic about how they could come up with some ingenious way to keep from obeying God's Word and not feel guilty. He says in vv.10-11, "For *Moses* said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But *you*<sup>2</sup> say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban" —' (that is, a gift to God)." Here is a father and mother in their old age. He is unable to earn a living anymore. They are in need. What are the children supposed to do? God had said that children are to honor their parents, which would include financial support in their time of need. They supported you for the first 20 years of your life, and you should help them out in the last few years of their old age. But the Pharisees and scribes were nullifying the Word of God by telling the grown children

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<sup>1</sup> One Rabbi, imprisoned by the Romans, used the water given to him for ceremonial hand washing, rather than for drinking and in the end nearly perished of thirst, because he was determined to observe the rules of hand washing rather than satisfy his thirst.

<sup>2</sup> In the Greek "you" is emphatic, in contrast with what God and Moses had said.

that even if they had a large sum of money which could be used to support them, they could simply declare it “Corban.” That Hebrew word means “an offering” or “regarded as dedicated.” So he says, “I sorry, but my money was dedicated to God by a vow. I can’t use it to help you.” Perhaps in some cases such a vow would have been spoken in a fit of anger or rebellion, and yet afterwards, even if he repented, the scribal legalists declared that the vow was unbreakable and that he had to give that money to God, even if his parents needed assistance. In fact, Jesus said in v.12, “Then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother.” Jesus was attacking such a self-serving religion, which put man-made rules and regulations before the obligations of the Word of God, and human need.

Now notice the conclusion that Jesus draws in v.13. They were “making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down.” Jesus said there was a direct conflict between a Jewish tradition, & the Word of God.

So if we are not careful, religious tradition can take priority over the Word of God. We may not admit it, but in actual practice, we may be more concerned about breaking a tradition than we are breaking a clear commandment of the Word of God. We will get all bent out of shape when someone violates some religious tradition that we consider important, and yet we will not be the least concerned about the lying gossip, or the drunkard, or the fornicator in the church!

Third, merely outwardly following religious traditions can lead to vain, empty worship, as He says in v.7, “And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” Such worship can be a waste of time & effort. How so? In the last of v.6 Jesus referred to Isaiah’s quote, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.” One problem was that they lost the lesson and spiritual truth behind the outward cleansing. The real point of the cleansing rituals was to illustrate that we need to cleanse our hearts & lives of sin. Yet with tradition we tend to just go through the motions of worship and religion. As we see in v.6, they were saying the right words, but inwardly their heart was far from the Lord. That is why Jesus called them “hypocrites” here. They were just play actors.

What Jesus said here was so contrary to expectation. They thought that the true measure of pleasing God was based on how meticulously a person observed these traditions. But Jesus said they were far from pleasing God. They were doing just the opposite.

When your religion becomes hardly more than outwardly following a religious tradition, then you are in danger of making the same mistake these Jews were making. There are a lot of people who are just going through a ritual in church today. They go to church, not because they love the Lord & want to worship Him. They attend just because of tradition. It’s a good tradition, but one that can lose its meaning. They sing the great old hymns, but too often they do so without any real thought of what they are singing, and they are not living what they are singing. How many times have you sung, “All to Jesus I Surrender,” & yet you give more to your server at the restaurant than you put in the offering plate! Listen, the heart is the part which God chiefly notices in our relationship to Him. Outwardly following a religious ritual, even with meticulous detail, does not make you a godly person. God requires worship, prayer, faith, & obedience that come from the heart.

Now for all of these reasons, our Baptist forefathers refused to be bound by religious traditions, even though they were persecuted by the established church. Yet over the centuries we have probably developed some of our own traditions that are not really biblical, and yet we cling to them. If we are going to be true to our Baptist heritage, we will not maintain a firm grip of what is

merely a tradition. Furthermore, we should grant liberty in matters of faith & practice that only have their basis in tradition. So instead of holding to traditions, we should:

### III. HOLD TO THE TRUE SOURCE OF AUTHORITY

What then can we do to know the truth? Not all human sources of authority are wrong or bad in every respect. However, Baptists & other Evangelical Christians believe the Bible is the only trustworthy authority on matters of faith & practice.

The priority of the Word of God is clearly implied in the teaching of Jesus here. He said in v.8, “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men...” What they should have done was hold to the Word of God, & laid aside their traditions when there was a conflict. Jesus rejected their practice of putting tradition ahead of the Word of God. Then in v.9 He said, “...you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.” So here is the principle that Jesus taught: If there is a conflict between the Bible, and these other sources of authority, then we must submit to the Bible. Tradition & other sources of authority must always take a backseat to the Word of God.

Now let’s apply this principle. I’ll give just one example. There are some in the Christian tradition who have a practice of calling their ministers “father.” That is a tradition that they strongly hold to. But what does the Word of God say? Jesus Himself says, “Do not call anyone on earth your father” (Mt. 23:9). Based on the *context* of that verse, I believe Jesus was talking about addressing a religious leader as “father.” In spite of the plain teaching of the Word of God, many will hold to the tradition of man & set aside the Word of God. When you do that, you are making the same mistake as the Pharisees that Jesus addressed in our text of Scripture. By the way, this is why I would never require you to address me by any other lofty title, such as Reverend or Doctor. It is fine with me if you call me pastor Steve or pastor Felker.

In light of this, I hope you can see why the Protestant Evangelical emphasis upon the Bible as our sole authority is so important. Only the Word of God is an infallible & inerrant authority of faith & practice. And so, when we realize that one of our traditions actually contradicts biblical teaching, then we should set aside the tradition, not the Word of God! And when a tradition is not clearly biblical, then we should be willing to forsake that tradition if it hinders us from reaching people for Christ.

This principle of holding to the authority of the Word of God alone is especially important when it comes to the doctrine of salvation. How can you know how to have eternal life? You will find the answer in the Word of God. Do you want to know how to have your sins forgiven? You will find the answer in the Word of God. Do you want to know how you should live in a way that pleases God? Don’t turn to your own reason. Don’t turn to experiences or religious traditions. Turn to the Word of God.

So what are we to do? What is required in order to put this principle into practice? First, we in the postmodern generation need to accept the concept of absolute truth, & the Bible is the only reliable standard of absolute truth. Second, we need to read the Bible for ourselves. We should trust in God and His written Word alone to lead us into the truth. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Conclusion: Sir Isaac Newton was a great scientist. He was the authority on the Law of Gravitation. One time he was reading his Bible & found in Dan. 12:4 “that knowledge shall increase, and many shall run to and fro.” He felt there must be a connection between the two. Knowledge shall increase

partly due to a rapid exchange of knowledge enabled by rapid travel. Based on that prophecy, Sir Isaac Newton predicted that man would travel at least 50 mph some day. A famous skeptic, Voltaire, read what Newton had predicted based on the Word of God. He then called Newton a “dotard” for believing the Bible. Who was right? We know now that the great Christian scientist Sir Isaac Newton was right.<sup>3</sup> The Bible is the supreme source of authority that we should rely upon for knowing the truths that are really important.

What do you believe is required for a person to go to heaven? Do you believe you go to heaven by going to church & being a good person? What is the source of your belief? Do you believe that based on your own human reason? Do you believe that based on religious tradition? Well this is what the Bible says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Put your faith in Jesus today, and receive the gift of eternal life.

What do you believe about morality? Do your moral beliefs & practices come from the world? Do they come from your own reason? Or do they come from the Word of God? I challenge you to live according to the Word of God. Some of you need to make a commitment to learn the Word of God. Some need to confess transgressing the Word of God, & receive God’s forgiveness. Whatever decision you need to make, don’t hesitate. Make things right with God today.

Sources: William Barclay; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Oliver B. Greene, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Vol. 3, (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); G. Campbell Morgan; Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Jerry Vines (notes from sermon tape of 9/25/83); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Mark (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Nothing available from Maclaren.

For further study, see sources for Mt. 15:1-9.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #2964* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979).