

Thought For The Week

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Traditions: Which Ones Should We Hold?

Human Commands vs the Teaching of the Apostles

The word “tradition” simply means something handed down—information, beliefs, or practices passed from one generation to the next. The Bible itself is the written record of what God once delivered by spoken word and by the hands of inspired men. Not every tradition, however, is equal. Some traditions come from men and end up opposing the will of God. Others come from the apostles and carry the authority of the Holy Spirit. The difference matters.

When Human Traditions Nullify God’s Word

In Mark 7 the Pharisees and scribes confronted Jesus because some of His disciples ate without performing the ceremonial hand-washing required by “the tradition of the elders.” Mark explains that the Pharisees and all the Jews would not eat unless they washed their hands in a special way, and that they observed many other such rituals—washing cups, pitchers, and kettles. Jesus answered by quoting Isaiah: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” They had laid aside the commandment of God in order to hold the tradition of men.

Jesus then pointed to a still clearer example. God had commanded, “Honor your father and your mother.” The Pharisees had devised a way around that command. A man could declare that whatever help he might have given his aging parents was “Corban”—that is, a gift devoted to God. Once the declaration was made, he was released from any further duty to support them. In this way, Jesus said, they made the word of God of no effect through their tradition.

The same chapter shows what truly defiles a person. Nothing that enters a man from outside can defile him; it is what comes out of the heart—evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, and the rest—that defiles. External ritual, however carefully performed, cannot cleanse the heart. When men elevate their own rules to the level of divine command, worship becomes vain.

Apostolic Traditions That Must Be Held

Not every tradition is of this kind. The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or by our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). He further commanded them, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, to withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition received from the apostles (2 Thessalonians 3:6). These traditions were not the inventions of men. They were the teaching the apostles delivered, both orally and in writing, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The context of those commands is important. Paul had just warned of a coming falling away and of the man of sin who would exalt himself against God. In the face of deception and departure, the church was to hold firmly to what the apostles had taught. After the first century, and increasingly in the centuries that followed, many churches began to drift from the written apostolic deposit. The remedy was never more human tradition; it was a return to what the apostles had handed down.

Practical Examples from the Apostles

Two clear examples illustrate the point. Concerning the collection for the saints, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “As I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: on the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper” (1 Corinthians 16:1–2). The same instruction was given to more than one group of churches. The collection of money was to be taken on the first day of the week so that it would be ready when needed. This is an apostolic tradition, binding wherever the church meets.

A second example appears in Acts 20:7. On the first day of the week the disciples came together to break bread. While the phrase “break bread” can sometimes mean an ordinary meal, the fact that they waited until the first day of the week shows that this was the Lord’s Supper. They could have eaten a common meal any day; they did not have to wait. The weekly observance of the Supper is the pattern the apostles left. Every week has a first day, just as every week under the old covenant had a Sabbath. To set the Supper aside or to observe it only occasionally is to depart from the tradition received from the apostles.

The same principle applies to the manner of worship. Believers are told to speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in the heart to the Lord. The instrument named in Scripture is the heart. When mechanical instruments are introduced, or when other elements are added that the apostles never commanded, the church is no longer simply following the tradition that was delivered. The order of the acts of worship may vary; the substance of what the apostles taught may not.

Worship in Spirit and Truth

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that the hour was coming—and had already arrived—when true worshipers would worship the Father in spirit and truth. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24). The right spirit and attitude are essential, but so is the right content. The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would guide the apostles into all truth, led them both in what they taught orally and in what they wrote. To follow their teaching is to worship according to the truth. To replace it with human rules is to return to the error of the Pharisees.

Holding Fast and the Call of the Gospel

To follow the faith is to hold the traditions taught by the apostles and to refuse those that come from men. Personal preference, the desire for change, or the claim that “the apostles got things wrong” cannot overturn what the Spirit delivered. Those who hear the word are called to believe, to repent of sins, to confess that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God, and to be baptized for the remission of sins. As Mark 16:16 declares, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” Those who have been saved are to remain faithful to the end. If any depart, the way back is open: return, let the church pray, and allow God to restore.

The choice is clear. We may cling to the commandments of men and render worship vain, or we may stand fast in the traditions the apostles received from the Lord and delivered to the churches. Only the latter path leads to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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Not every tradition is the same. Some are handed down by men and end up opposing the will of God. Others come from the apostles and carry the authority of the Holy Spirit. The difference is vital.

In Mark 7 the Pharisees challenged Jesus because His disciples ate without the ceremonial hand-washing required by “the tradition of the elders.” Jesus answered with Isaiah’s words: they honored God with their lips while their hearts were far from Him, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. They had set aside God’s command in order to keep their own tradition. A clear example was Corban. God had said, “Honor your father and your mother.” The Pharisees allowed a man to declare that the help he owed his aging parents was a gift devoted to God, thereby releasing him from the duty. In this way they made the word of God of no effect. Jesus further taught that nothing entering a person from outside defiles him. What defiles is what comes from the heart—evil thoughts, adulteries, thefts, and the rest. External ritual cannot cleanse the heart. When men raise their own rules to the level of divine command, worship becomes vain.

The apostles, however, delivered traditions that must be held. Paul wrote, “Stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or by our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). He commanded the church to withdraw from those who walk disorderly and not according to the tradition received from the apostles (2 Thessalonians 3:6). These were not human inventions. They were the teaching given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Two examples stand out. Paul ordered the churches of Galatia and Corinth to take the collection on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1–2). In Acts 20:7 the disciples came together on the first day of the week to break bread—the Lord’s Supper. They waited for that day because it was the appointed time, not a common meal. Weekly observance of both the collection and the Supper is the pattern left by the apostles. Likewise, worship is to be offered in spirit and truth (John 4:23–24), following what the Spirit guided the apostles to teach, not what men later add.

To follow the faith is to hold the traditions the apostles delivered and to refuse those that come from men. Those who hear are called to believe, repent, confess Christ, and be baptized for the remission of sins (Mark 16:16). Those who are saved must remain faithful. The choice is plain: cling to the commandments of men, or stand fast in what the apostles received from the Lord.

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