

How Should We Handle Tradition?

When the report of Jesus' miracles spread abroad, Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem made their way north to the region of Galilee to confront Jesus. They charged that the Lord's disciples neglected to keep the "traditions" of the elders because they did not ceremonially wash their hands before they ate. But Jesus focused on the testers, asking "Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matt 15.3).

This narrative highlights a problem that has troubled followers of Jesus for many centuries—how do we faithfully discern between "the commandments of God" and our own human traditions?

Key Terms Defined

"Commandment," in the context of Matthew 15, refers to that which has been delivered to mankind via divine revelation.

"For **God** commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But **you** say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition **you** have made void **the word of God.**" (Matt 15.4-6)

Similar language is used in Luke 23.56, as Luke describes some of the female disciples at the tomb of Jesus.

Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested **according to the commandment.**

When terms like *commandment*, *law*, or *the word of God* are used in Scripture, they most often inherently represent an obligation that has been imposed by God himself under which human beings are amenable. If I, or you, or anyone else violates those divine edicts, we are guilty of sin.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. (1 John 3.4)

On the other hand, our English word "**tradition**" has old linguistic roots that literally speak of "instruction that has been handed down." It's a term that can certainly be used in very positive senses, framed by divine spokesmen in terms of authoritative instruction.

Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the **traditions**, just as I delivered them to you. (1 Cor 11.2, NASB)

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the **traditions** which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us. (2 Thes 2.15, NASB)

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the **tradition** which you received from us. (2 Thes 3.6, NASB)

In other contexts, *tradition* can denote **human instructions** backed by **human authority** that have been handed down from generation to generation.

He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of **your tradition**?” (Matt 15.3)

“You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

‘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**.’”
(Matt 15.7-9)

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to **human tradition**, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. (Col 2.8)

Obviously, the fundamental danger in dealing with human traditions is personally treating them or binding them on others as if they were delivered by God. Such can become “burdens” that are unnecessarily levied on people, robbing them of legitimate freedom in serving Christ.

“They (the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day) tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.” (Matt 23.4)

The Need for Spiritual Discernment

In an effort to faithfully judge between the words of God and human traditions, certain fundamental principles must be consistently remembered and employed.

1. **The will of God was made known through people who were credentialed by miraculous signs.** The Jewish law came through Moses (John 1.17). The reception by Moses of the commandments of God was confirmed by supernatural phenomena (Exo 19.16ff; 24.17). The new law—the law of liberty—came through Jesus Christ (John 1.17), and was also validated by miracles.

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20.30-31)

The miracles that were subsequently performed by the appointees of Jesus (the apostles, disciples, evangelists) validated the divine origin of the New Testament.

2. Sacred law is not amenable (conformable, compliant) to human alteration.

“You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you.” (Deut 4.2)

Every word of God proves true;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Do not add to his words,
lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar.
(Prov 30.5-6)

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev 22.18-19)

Sacred law remains applicable for the one who is under its jurisdiction, as long as it is designed by the lawgiver to last.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Matt 5.17-18)

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28.18-20)

Tradition, on the other hand, evolves. It's established by human habits and customs. It will vary in its character from place to place and time to time. Tradition is not intrinsically evil, since it operates in the realm of expediency and human judgment. But it is to be rebuked and reprioritized when it is thrust into the role of and bound on others as “law.”

And so, there are two ditches that are frequently fallen into when traveling the Law vs. Tradition Highway. First, there is the tendency to reduce law to the status of tradition. Second, there is the disposition that turns tradition into law. Both approaches are wrong and those who have lost their way in either direction must be lovingly, yet firmly directed toward a more accurate handling of God's revealed will.

Your Challenge for the Week

- ▶ List some ways that human beings have been guilty of transforming law into tradition.

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