

Mark Part 7

Mark 7

Tradition gives birth to false religion

- *Mark 7:1-8*

Tradition replaces truth

- *Mark 7:9-13*

Tradition twists truth

- *Mark 7:14-15, 21-23*

Tradition chokes ministry

- *Mark 7:17-20*

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
July 26, 2026
Michael O'Neill

The Gospel of Mark Chapter 7¹

Shortly after I had become a Christian in high school, I began to share the Gospel with my parents. So one time when I was telling my mom about how much God loves her, she said, "That all sounds great, but I like to wear pants." I said, "What does that have to do with anything?" She said that she had attended a Nazarene church when she was in high school in the 1950s, and she was reprimanded for wearing pants. She was also told if she was going to be a Christian, she could never wear jewelry or makeup. And she could never go to dances or movies or play cards (and my mom loved all that). I was dumbfounded, but she was right. Part of our own denominational history included those rules, along with other things going to restaurants on Sundays, and something called "mixed bathing" – boys and girls, men and women couldn't swim together in a pool. Those rules started with good intentions of avoiding temptations; we might be quick to judge those rules and traditions, but we all have our own traditions. For example, does your family open Christmas presents on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day? Why that day? There's a story that one lady tells that, while preparing her Christmas ham, she cut off the ends. Her daughter asked her why, and she said *her* mother taught her to do it that way. So the lady called her mom and asked why, and she said her mother told her to do it that way. So the lady called grandma and asked her why, and she said it was because the pan she used was too short.

Traditions.

We are in chapter seven of the Gospel of Mark today and the clash between the Jewish religious rulers and Jesus takes center stage, and it is all about traditions. Let's start by looking at the first eight verses:

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as

¹ Kent Brower, *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2012)
David Smith, *Mark: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)
John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)
Ed Rowell, *Tradition Becomes More Attractive Than Truth*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/preaching/sermons/rowell091806e/>
Ed Rowell, *Good Guys, Bad Guys, or Us Guys? Getting to Know the Pharisees*
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/preaching/sermons/rowell091806a/>

it is written:

““These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’

You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”
(Mark 7:1-8, niv)

The Pharisees believed traditions were more than just good ideas or beliefs. They believed their traditions had the same authority as Scripture. They believed that God gave the written “Torah” (or “instructions”) which was the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). We believe that too. But they also said that God gave them the oral Torah (which was the traditions of the elders). The oral Torah was divided into six sections and contained laws and traditions about agriculture, festivals, women, civil and criminal law, holy things, and ritual purity. The written Torah – the first five books of the Bible – contain 613 commandments, and all of those are just specific applications of the Ten Commandments. The oral traditions though contain 4,224 legal rules.

One author points out why they had so many rules:

They said: “The Law is complete; it contains everything necessary for the living of a good life; therefore, in the Law, there must be a regulation to govern every possible incident in every possible moment for every possible man.” So they set out to extract from the great principles of the law an infinite number of rules and regulations to govern every conceivable situation in life.

In other words, they changed the Law of the great principles into the legalism of by-laws and regulations.

The best example of this tendency is seen in the Sabbath law. Exodus 20:8-11 says:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

But people were not content with a principle, a guideline. They wanted specifics, they wanted laws and loopholes. Later generations spent centuries defining “work” and listing the things in their traditions that could and could not be done on the Sabbath day.² So for instance, you were only allowed to walk .6 miles on the sabbath in any direction from your home and back. One step more and you were working on the Sabbath; you broke the law.

So, during the time of Jesus, part of being a Pharisee was memorizing these oral traditions verbatim and passing them along faithfully. To the Pharisees, these traditions were just as authoritative as the written Law.

By the time we get to chapter seven, this conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees has been

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/preaching/sermons/rowell091806a/>

going on for a while now. They would make an accusation against Jesus and he would teach, usually with a parable. The accusation this week is found verse 5: “Why don’t your disciples live according to the ‘tradition of the elders’?”

It all began over the issue of hand washing. When you read about this in the New Testament, it’s not at all like we think about it; it has nothing to do with hygiene. The issue with the Pharisees was a symbolic ritual to cleanse a person from the sinfulness of the world. Ceremonial hand washing proved you obeyed the traditional laws.

This ritual cleansing began, as most traditions do, with a good motive—to remain undefiled and holy before God. But the ritual itself soon grew increasingly complex—there were even elaborate debates about such things as the position of one’s fingers as the water was poured over the hands. In today’s passage, Jesus and his disciples are attacked for failing to observe this tradition.

In verses 7-9, Jesus tells the problem: “You set aside the commandments of God in order to observe your own traditions,” and then what follows are examples of the Pharisees putting traditions over truth. The reason we’re looking at this in the first place is that we all have our own sacred traditions, and we’re not usually real wild about giving up those traditions, are we?

J. I. Packer said, “The question, then, is not whether we have traditions, but whether our traditions conflict with the only absolute standard on these matters: Holy Scripture.”³

Of course, not everything having to do with tradition is bad. Traditions give us identity—they tell us who we are. They highlight our roots and tell us where we came from. They set boundaries for our lifestyle by telling us how to behave. So if that’s true, then what’s wrong with tradition? There are four important answers to that question that we will get from Jesus’ response to the Pharisees, starting that...

Tradition gives birth to false religion.

Remember what Jesus said in verse 6: “He replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites...’ This is the first recorded incident of Jesus calling the Pharisees “hypocrites,” which really means “actors playing a part.”

It’s already been made clear by Jesus in these first seven chapters that true holiness or heart purity is a matter of the affections and attitudes that come out of us, not just the outward actions and associations. If we have holiness in us, it will come out of us, but appearing holy on the outside doesn’t mean we are on the inside. One theologian says, “The pious Pharisees thought they were holy because they obeyed the Law and avoided external defilement. Jesus taught that a person who obeys the Law externally can still break the Law *in his heart*, and that external “defilement” has little connection with the condition of the inner person.”⁴

In other words, Jesus knew sin is a matter of the heart. The religious people didn’t want to deal with their hearts, so they focused on behaviors. This was something that Jesus

³ JI Packer, *Truth and Power: The Place of Scripture in the Christian Life* (2026, IVP, Lisle, IL)

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996)

intentionally challenged; He got to the very heart of true faith.

Traditions have tremendous power over us and come to just seem *right* to us, long after we've forgotten the reason for them – or if the reason was even right to begin with. They gain a tight grip on our emotions, so we become blind to the hold they have on us. They begin to drive what we do, and, over time, they tend to feel like doctrine. We like traditions because they are easier to obey than God's Word. They can be kept by our own strength, without ever having a relationship with Jesus. We can all be guilty of this.

In his book *The Present Future*, Reggie McNeal writes that sometimes, what we in the church fight to defend is really a “church culture,” not what the Bible calls Christianity: “The imminent demise under discussion is the collapse of the unique culture in North America that has come to be called “church.” This church culture has become confused with biblical Christianity, both inside the church and out. In reality, the church culture in North America is a vestige of the original movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle matches theirs

Anytime we major on external acts instead of internal attitudes, we are moving the church toward irrelevance and eventual death. And worse, when we major on externals, we have moved away from the message of Jesus.”⁵

When we focus on externals, here's what it means: if you've been hurt by the church, or felt judged, or you've turned away because you saw legalism or institutionalism or spiritual abuse or worse, it is because *that* church focused more on external traditions than they did holiness of heart and life – allowing the Holy Spirit to change their hearts with love and humility. I'll tell you, we work hard *not* to be *that* church. Because all that can result when...

Tradition replaces truth.

Look at verses 9-13:

Jesus continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” (Mark 7:9-13, niv)

Okay, what is this business of “corban”? What's that about? Corban was a pledge of a future offering. The Pharisee would promise that they would give, say \$10,000 to the Temple. But saying it was “corban” meant it would go to the Temple when that person died. But while they are still alive, they could spend it on themselves or do whatever they wanted with it. But, if someone needed their help financially – even if it was their parents – they could say, “I can't help you because I've given \$10,000 *corban*.” That way they could look spiritual but

⁵ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (2003, Leadership Network Publications, Dallas, TX)

still be selfish with their money. God's commandments told them to help other people, but tradition allowed them to be selfish while still looking holy on the outside.

Historically, one of the major tenants of the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s was something called "Sola Scriptura," or "Scripture alone." That's because the reformers looked at the Catholic Church and saw that a Pope or even a priest could say something and that was considered as authoritative as Scripture itself. So, for instance, if the Pope wanted more money, he would say that if you gave a certain amount of money to the church it would buy your dead loved one out of hell. *Nowhere* in the Bible does it say that! But because the Pope said it, it was considered Scripture.

We hear that and we think, "Yeah that's wrong!" But before you become too judgy, we can be guilty of doing something similar!

I seldom if ever hear people get upset and leave a church over genuine doctrinal issues. They may say it is, but usually it's a cultural bias that they've supported by proof-texting – pulling Scriptures out of context.

Every church has traditions. For example, the Bible does not give us specific instructions on what time to meet together. But most churches in North America have worship services around 10 or 11 a.m. on Sunday morning. Why? I'll tell you: it's a tradition!

It's also a schedule dictated by dairy cattle. See, our ancestors had a cow to milk and other farm chores to do, and so church was scheduled late enough in the morning so they could get those chores done, then load the family in a wagon and get to church by 10 or 11 a.m.

What about Sunday school? Sunday school is just a little over 200 years old. Do you know why it started? In the late 1700s children worked in factories. They were growing up illiterate. But they got Sundays off. So a guy named Robert Raikes started teaching "school" on Sunday mornings for children. He taught them how to read by using the Bible. That way the children could learn good morals and values, too. But Sunday school was highly criticized by religious leaders. They said it was sacrilege to do anything besides go to church. But over time that changed to the point that now a church is accused of being unscriptural if they *don't* have Sunday School, especially for children. The problem is that the Bible is clear that parents are responsible for their children's spiritual growth, but then some parents blame the church for not doing enough – even though a child's growth in Christ cannot happen in an hour or two a week. It happens at home. It's caught more than taught.

Then there's the altar call. The altar call was first called "the anxious seat" – a place where people could come sit and receive specific prayer or counseling. Then, in the late 1800s churches began doing "camp meetings" or "revival meetings" and during those, one evangelistic preacher named Charles Finney began using the chair as a place to come kneel to show they've made a decision to accept Christ. But to this day I still have people question why we don't do altar calls every Sunday.

What about the order of our services? Nowhere in the Bible does it say specifically how a worship service is to be conducted. But once in a while, when we change the order of things around, regardless of the reason, I'll get an anonymous note that tells me they don't like it.

Did you know there are no specific styles of preaching mentioned in the Bible? But

everyone has their favorite. Preaching has changed dramatically from generation to generation. In fact, Jesus' style of preaching would be criticized today by some Christians for not having enough "meat." I've been told by people "I don't preach enough depth" and by other people that I preach "too deep" and they can't follow it. Believe it or not, there have been times I've heard both on the same Sunday.

Did you know that when hymns first began being sung in church, there was severe disapproval? Before that time, the church had sung the Psalms, usually in Latin. But hymns were introduced in common language and people didn't like it. They said hymns were too secular. For example, the words to "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" were written by Martin Luther, but the tune was a popular drinking song from the bars of Germany. Luther did that so people would be able to sing it. The church accused him of being too secular and too shallow – not spiritual enough.

Now, 400 years later, even if we sing songs with Scriptural lyrics that are set to contemporary music, some people will say that we are too secular and too shallow – not spiritual enough. Even though in many cases the lyrics are right out of the Bible!

What about praying before a meal? There are some people that, if they came over to our house for dinner and we put the food on the table and I said, "Dig in while it's hot!" and started eating, they'd think I'm not very spiritual because I didn't pray first. Now, it's a good thing to give thanks before a meal, but Scripture never commands us to do it. It's a tradition.

How about the symbol of the cross? Archeological evidence has not found the cross used as a symbol of the Christian faith until at least 200 years after the Resurrection. It was the Emperor Constantine who made it popular in the third century, putting it on the shields of Roman soldiers as an emblem of good luck.

We used to have a big wooden cross hanging in the foyer. 13 years ago we moved it to the outside of the building on the North side. But at that time there was a guy who nearly popped an artery and accused us of taking Christ out of the church. Please tell me where in the Bible are we commanded to use the cross in our signs or our architecture? Nowhere.

When I first became a Christian, my youth pastor, Steve Dickerson warned me about what he called "PC's" – personal convictions. He said people in church have PC's, and those sometimes help them in their faith, but the danger is that people turn them into Scripture, and those people become a self-appointed authority of what is spiritual and what is not and demand that everyone follow their traditions. And the first casualty of this attitude is relationships. We value our traditions over our relationships, and are even willing to break the ties of the family of faith when we don't get our way. That's what verses 11 and 12 are all about. You can't neglect relationships on the basis of spiritual traditions, because...

Tradition twists truth.

Jesus makes this clear in verses 14 and 15:

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them.

Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.” (Mark 7:14-15, niv)

Then look down at verses 21-23 –

“For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” (Mark 7:21-23, niv)

That discussion is about food, But then Jesus moves it to a list of serious heart conditions. In the first books of the Old Testament, God gave some very strict guidelines about what foods they could and could not eat. The reasons were to help create their identity, to set them apart from the cultures around them, and for practical health reasons that they didn’t understand at the time. But those dietary guidelines became a way that people could look at others and say: “He’s not keeping God’s rules. He is defiled. I keep God’s rules. I’m not defiled.”

So Jesus was very clear: defilement comes from within. In other words, spiritual dirt doesn’t come from outside of us, it is manufactured in the human heart.

Over the course of church history we’ve produced rules that are designed to keep us from external defilement – like the things my mother was condemned for.

Now, all these might start out as just good sense guidelines, but the problem is that we slowly and subtly twist the truth and come to believe something heretical: that defilement is external, not internal. That is a dangerous twist of truth. Spiritually speaking, it’s just as dangerous as someone changing a one-way street sign to the other direction—it sends us places we don’t want to go.

In that day an issue was food, but the Pharisees went beyond what God had required. A big issue today for some people is clothing. But when we lay out expectations for how people should dress for church and justify it by saying, “They should show respect for God,” you’re adding to the Law, putting something on people that God doesn’t require.

When I was in high school, there was a girl who was a friend of mine, and she wasn’t a Christian. In fact, at the age of fifteen she became a legal adult and left her home. But another family member took advantage and put her to work for him in what we politely call the “adult industry.” She was trafficked to men. So another Christian friend named Rick, and I began talking to her about Jesus, and she was interested. She agreed to come to church with us one Sunday. She dressed up the best way she knew how – with a short skirt, fishnet stockings, and a rabbit fur coat. We were all so excited to be at church together! I was sure all the people at church would be so happy to see this young lady there! Can you guess what happened? We got some dirty looks. Some people even said, “you don’t belong here like that!” I was shocked and disillusioned. Really, I was naïve. But worse, my friend was judged and rejected.

Too often, people gather together as a church to “keep the world out” and not get “defiled.” But we’ve already seen over and over again that *Jesus didn’t get infected by sin; he disinfected sin with love.*

The temptation for some people is to create an “us versus them” view of the world and

see the world outside the church as the enemy. Their answer is to live inside the bubble in a Christian subculture, with our own music, our own books, our own schools, and even our own entertainment. We end up isolating ourselves thinking this makes us pure. But the Bible does not say, “The fear of the culture is the beginning of wisdom.” It says in Proverbs 1:7, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.”

Two great dangers happen when we think isolation means purity. One, we fool ourselves into thinking we are now safe from defilement. Two, we lose both awareness of and credibility with our culture—the very ones we are supposed to be transforming.

So as a result...

Tradition chokes effective ministry.

We become so focused on our traditions that we are no longer able to make a difference in the world around us.

Look at what happened in chapter seven:

“After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. “Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. (Mark 7:17-20, niv)

Jesus nailed the Pharisees on two of their traditions. The first was the hand-washing deal, which seems relatively harmless, but actually contradicts the truth of Scripture regarding defilement. Second was the food laws of the Old Testament. Jesus declared that those didn’t apply anymore. And aren’t you glad! Now you can walk out of here and eat anything you like—pork, shrimp...ostrich... I mean, bacon is the candy of the meat world! I’m so glad we can eat pork! No offense if you are vegan.

But if you look at this story and begin to apply it, it makes sense that some of our own traditions have become fossilized. Some in fact may actually contradict Scripture.

This church has some wonderful family traditions that we need to hang on to. But we need to recognize the difference between tradition and truth and not draw a line in the sand over preference, over PC’s, over tradition.

The Pharisees had made their traditions so rigid, so inaccessible to the average person that they were keeping people away from God. And the same potential exists for Pharisees like us. The church creates methods that help it accomplish its mission during specific times and places. But then, those methods become tradition, and they become sacred, and then when those things are no longer effective and need to change, those traditions begin to choke ministry. People reject the change and keep the church ministry from being effective.

For example, when West Valley Church started 70 years ago, our community was mostly Anglo English speaking and rural. But today, our community is a city of nearly half

Hispanic and half English speaking. So what? Well, Jesus told us to share the gospel with all nations – meaning all language groups and cultures. So we changed our tradition and now have bilingual signs, bilingual slides, a bilingual website and communications. This message, right now, is being translated into Spanish. Our singing is majority English but some Spanish. We are and will be one church with two languages. Soon we'll have a second Sunday morning service that is just the opposite of this one in mostly Spanish, so people can choose which one their more comfortable in. A few people have left our church over this. I've even had someone say, "'Those people' – I cringe as I quote this – 'those people' are in America – they should speak English. We shouldn't cater to them." But I've got news: West Valley Church's primary goal is to help people become citizens of *the Kingdom of God* – not citizens of the US. Don't misunderstand me – we don't discourage people from becoming US citizens; in fact we encourage it. But we are *not* an entity of the government; we are an entity of the Kingdom of God. We are here to accomplish God's mission, not the government's. Most of the time, those things don't contradict each other. But if they do, guess who we'll obey? Listen, if you picked up our church and dropped us in communist China, *our mission would not change*. Our methods – our traditions would probably change, but our mission would not. We must avoid the trap of traditions if we're going to be effective. Traditions of the church culture can become the very barriers that keep people away from God. We'll respect someone's PC's and traditions, but we may not practice them, and they will *never* replace Scripture. (I need to be careful; talking this way got Jesus crucified.)

Let's pray.

Benediction:

Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:16-17, nlt)