

3. Her reserve seen in her proper humility.

D. The Rewarding of faith (15:28; Mk. 7:29f)

### III. JESUS FEEDS 4000 AND HEALS MANY OF DECAPOLIS

(15:29-39; Mk. 7:31—8:10)

A. Situation: Journey through Decapolis from Tyre and Sidon to Lake Galilee (Mt. 15:29; Mk. 7:31)

B. Many miracles of healing (Mt. 15:30f; Mk. 7:32-37)

C. Jesus feeds the 4000 (Mt. 15:32-39; Mk. 8:1-10)

## Section 36

### JESUS DEBATES WITH JERUSALEM PHARISEES ABOUT THE ELDERS' TRADITIONS

(Parallel: Mark 7:1-23)

TEXT: 15:1-20

1 Then there come to Jesus from Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes, saying, 2 Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.

3 And he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? 4 For God said, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, He that speaketh evil of thy father or mother, let him die the death. 5 But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, That wherewith thou mightest have been profited by me is given to God; 6 he shall not honor his father. And ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition. 7 Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying,

8 This people honoreth me with their lips;  
But their heart is far from me.

9 But in vain do they worship me,

Teaching as *their* doctrines the precepts of men.

10 And he called to him the multitude, and said unto them, Hear, and understand: 11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man; but that which proceedeth out of the mouth, this defileth the man.

12 Then came the disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, when they heard this saying?

13 But he answered and said, Every plant which my heavenly Father planted not, shall be rooted up. 14 Let them alone: they are blind guides. And if the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit.

15 And Peter answered and said unto him, Declare unto us the parable.

16 And he said, Are ye also even yet without understanding? 17 Perceive ye not, that whatsoever goeth into the mouth passeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? 18 But the things which proceed out of the mouth come forth out of the heart; and they defile the man. 19 For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, railings: 20 these are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not the man.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. How can we distinguish good traditions from bad ones?
- b. Why were there scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem here in Galilee? What was their purpose for prowling around so far from home, precisely at this time and place?
- c. It is a matter of observable fact that the disciples of Jesus did in fact eat with defiled hands. Why do you think they did this? Do you think the multitudes ceremoniously washed their hands before eating the bread and fish miraculously provided by Jesus? Why did not Jesus insist on their washing their hands?
- d. John 7:1 says that about this time "Jesus went about in Galilee; He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill Him." This very clearly was the time of the Passover (Jn. 6:4). Does John mean to suggest that Jesus Himself did not attend the Passover feast in Jerusalem? If so, what does this reveal about Jesus? If not, what do the available facts mean? Did Jesus, as God in the flesh, need to attend such feasts, commanded for all Jews, even though He Himself was Hebrew? Or, to put it another way, does Jesus violate Mosaic Law as well as the traditions of the elders?
- e. If you take the view that Jesus did not attend the feast, because for good and sufficient reasons He was exempt from attendance, do you think that He would keep the Apostles away from the Passover? If so, why? If not, why not?
- f. At what point, do you think, does tradition make void the commands of God, or make worship "vain"? Use the illustration in

the text to help you formulate your answer.

- g. Jesus called the Pharisees "hypocrites." Wherein did their hypocrisy lie?
- h. Do you think that what had been declared "Corban" was actually given to God? That is what the word means, but did the children really turn it over to God? What is your opinion?
- i. What do you think the command "Honor your father and mother" includes? Did Jesus Himself honor His own earthly parents in this way? If so, when or how?
- j. Do you think that Isaiah had the Pharisees in mind when he penned the words quoted by Jesus in reference to them? If not, how could Jesus affirm: "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you"? If so, what is the message intended for the people of Isaiah's own day?
- k. Can you explain why a religion, or worship, based on human commandments is useless?
- l. Can false religious teaching or religious leaders with faulty ideas actually lead sincere followers to destruction? Is not sincerity a sufficient safeguard against that eventuality?
- m. But, all that the Pharisees and scribes were doing for the Jewish people was interpret the Mosaic Law and the prophets for them, so that they could know God's will. Do you think it is right, then, to interpret the Scriptures for other people?
- n. Explain how BOTH of the following mottos would have helped to prevent the Pharisees from making the mistakes of which Jesus accused them:
  - (1) "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak.  
Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."
  - (2) "Where the Scriptures speak, we are silent.  
Where the Scriptures are silent, we speak."

Do not choke on this second expression of the same profound truth! Study it to see its genius, then show how both propositions would have helped even the Pharisees to handle God's Word more worthily.
- o. Do you think Jesus could contradict Old Testament teaching by the principles He espoused? If so, how could He do that—had the OT been wrong? If not, then how is His teaching in this section to be understood?
- p. Were the Apostles being defiled according to the OT Law when they ate without washing?
- q. According to the principles of Jesus, does ANYTHING, either eaten or drunk, ever defile a person? If so, what? If not, why not?

- r. Would you drink blood or eat things strangled, i.e., with the blood in it, or any food made with blood? Why? (Cf. Ac. 15:20, 29)
- s. Why should the disciples be so concerned about how Jesus talks about the opinions of the learned Pharisees?
- t. What, do you think, is the relative responsibility before God of a "blind guide" and a "blind follower"? Is one more responsible than the other, or are both equally guilty? Are they equally lost?
- u. Does it really matter much whether one is defiled by what comes out of the heart? Are you personally concerned about being defiled in the sight of God? What does defilement mean to you?
- v. Why could not the disciples understand the teaching Jesus gave regarding the true source of defilement, i.e., what factors would have hindered their grasping His meaning immediately?
- w. Can you explain why the Law of Moses contained such regulations about defilement by eating or touching certain things which the New Testament definitely and clearly allows? Did God change His mind in the meantime?
- x. What is so earth-shaking, from a religious standpoint, about Mark's inserted comment (7:19): "Thus He declared all foods clean"?
- y. Is Jesus defending as "clean" food or drink that would be destructive to the human body? In what sense are we to understand Mark's word "all foods"? What about foods to which one is allergic? What about foods or drink which leave one stuffed or drunk?
- z. Is Jesus teaching us to tolerate others more than the Pharisees did, or to reject and condemn such unscriptural practices in religion like theirs?
- aa. If Jesus is more concerned about the condition of a man's heart, why does he pointedly list so many outward manifestations of what He calls real defilement, or sin? Why does He still list murder as defiling, when He is really concerned about the hate that prompts it, for example?
- bb. Is pride always wrong? How and when does it defile a man?
- cc. What kind(s) of foolishness defile a person?
- dd. Why list three kinds of sexual sins: fornication, adultery and lasciviousness? Are they not all sexual sins? What is the difference between them?
- ee. If the Pharisees were able to pervert a God-given religion like Judaism, what are our chances of twisting a beautiful relationship with God like Christianity into something that Jesus Himself would

not be able to recognize? What if we have already made this fatal switch? What remedy is open to us to correct whatever is false or perverted in our religion, in order to bring ourselves back to Jesus' original plans for His people? A more important question is: what are the unchanging marks of true religion whereby we can judge ourselves and recognize the degree of truth or falsity in our religion?

- ff. What is the psychological danger in that unsound compensation made by an individual who deliberately sets aside a commandment of God, because it does not suit him to observe it, and then thinks he can make up for it by being extra careful about something else? The Pharisees were past masters at this sort of dodging their moral responsibility. Do you know any Pharisees in your circle of acquaintances? What do you think about people who preach a lot about baptism but ignore Jesus' orders to evangelize the whole world? What about Christians who are especially punctilious about the form of baptism, but are not especially bothered by the selfishness and indifference to others' needs seen among their members?
- gg. Do you think the Pharisees brought this question to Jesus because they hated sin, or because they simply hated to see any of their opinions or traditional views discounted or put in doubt? Why do you bring up objections in a discussion of religion or morality? Is it because you hate sin, love sinners and long to save them from the consequences of a false philosophy, or do you bring up arguments in order to bolster your confidence in the views and conclusions held by some revered teacher in your acquaintance? Are you a Pharisee?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

A group of Pharisees, along with some doctors of the law who had come up from Jerusalem, approached Jesus. They noticed that some of His disciples ate their meals with "defiled" hands—in other words, without washing them in the ceremonial way. (In fact, the Pharisees and the Jews in general never eat unless they have washed their hands in a particular way, following an old, established tradition. It is their practice never to eat anything upon returning from the market place until they have sprinkled themselves for ceremonial purification. There are many other points which they consider essential on which they have a traditional rule to maintain, for example, the immersing

of cups, jugs and copper basins.) Accordingly, the Pharisees and lawyers challenged Jesus, "Why do your disciples not follow the ancient tradition, but eat their food with 'defiled' hands? In fact, they do not wash their hands when they eat."

Jesus answered them, "And what about you? You have a fine way of rejecting and breaking God's clear commandment in order to keep your tradition! Because God, speaking through Moses (Ex. 20:12; Dt. 5:16), commanded: 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Anyone who reviles his parents must die.' (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9) But you say, 'If a person tells his parents, Anything of mine which might have been used for your benefit is now vowed to God,' then you permit them no longer to do anything for their parents. And so, by your man-made rule, you render God's direct command null and void. This is typical of your procedure! You hypocrites; Isaiah (29:13) beautifully described your kind when he said:

"These people say they honor me;  
But their heart is somewhere else.  
When they worship me, they are wasting their time,  
Since they just teach men's ideas for divine law.' "

Then Jesus called the people around Him again and exhorted them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand this: there is no defilement so damaging in what one eats as that moral contamination involved in what one says or does!"

Later, when Jesus had gone indoors, leaving the people outside, the disciples approached Him with the question, "Do you realize that you have horrified the Pharisees with this sort of talk?"

His answer was: "Every plant that my heavenly Father did not plant will be pulled up by the roots; so ignore them! They are blind guides leading the blind: anyone who follows them will fall into a pit with them!"

But Peter demanded, "Explain what you meant by that enigma."

Jesus responded, "Are you all also still unable to grasp this? Do you not understand that what you eat will not harm your soul, because food does not come into contact with your innermost being, but simply passes through your digestive system and out again?"

(By saying this, Jesus declared all foods kosher or ceremonially pure.)

He went on: "But what a man says, comes from his soul. This is what really pollutes a man. For from within the man, out of his own

mind, arise evil thoughts like murder, adultery, fornication, theft, perjury, slander, greed, malice, deceit; indecency, envy, arrogance and folly. These things come from within a man's mind. These are the things which make a man unfit for God, but there is no defilement in eating without first washing your hands according to some ceremonial ritual!"

### SUMMARY

After the climax and collapse of Jesus' Galilean ministry, He was attacked more vigorously by the Jewish authorities on the basis of His failure to demand that His followers obey the traditions of the fathers. He counterattacked by pointing out the fundamental danger in following human tradition at all: it can very easily take precedence over clear commands of God. Further, human tradition leads people into a useless worship based upon what are thought to be God's commands when they have only human authority for their practice. The specific charge of the Pharisees and theologians was a clear case of exaggeratedly externalized ceremonialism. Jesus counters by showing with undeniable clarity that real religion is that of the heart, and that the real defilement or pollution is that of the heart and soul of a man, not merely of his body. The nervous disciples feared the consequences of Jesus' severe teaching upon the Pharisees. Jesus retorted that the Pharisees' ideas were, after all, of human origin and worthless, but dangerous enough to destroy both the blind leader as well as all who blindly follow him. When the Twelve asked for further clarification, Jesus patiently explained that eating *per se* is a purely physical process that leaves the soul totally unaffected. Contrarily, the products of a man's mind, the expression of his wrong desires, in short, his sins, really corrupt a man.

### NOTES

#### A. THE ATTACK LED BY THE PHARISEES:

"You break our rules!"

15:1 **Then:** because the Synoptic writers' time-connections are difficult to ascertain with precision, we are limited to the supposition that this attack took place while Jesus was in Galilee sometime either

before or after the Passover mentioned in Jn. 6:4 in connection with the feeding of the five thousand. Perhaps the exciting rumors about the feeding of the 5000 men had been spread around at that feast in Jerusalem, spurring the national leaders to move decisely to block Jesus' mounting popularity and theological influence. **There came to Jesus from Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes:** this fact harmonizes well with John's comment (7:1): "After this (the feeding of the 5000 and the Sermon on the Bread of Life preached at Capernaum) Jesus went about in Galilee; He would not go about in Judea, because the Jews sought to kill him."

Whether or not John means to imply that Jesus did not attend the Passover mentioned in Jn. 6:4, is not clear, because the Apostle uses *peripateîn*: "to walk around, to circulate in an area," perhaps in the sense of evangelistic tours in Judea. However, he may be implying that Jesus actually attended the feast, merely mingling with these masses rather than doing any attention-getting public teaching and miracles. (See Arndt-Gingrich, 654.) Nothing positive is affirmed about whether Jesus hindered the Twelve from attending the feast, if He himself remained in Galilee. There is wisdom in avoiding a fatal conclusion of one's ministry when he who does so knows there is yet work to do. He told the Twelve: "When persecuted in one town, flee to the next" (Mt. 10:23). When the time came, Jesus did not avoid death. There is a day to flee and a day to die. See Thought Questions d. and e. for further problems involved in this question. The Synoptic Gospels record the travels (cf. John's *peripateîn en tē Galilaïa*) Jesus took during the period between the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles that year, a period which perhaps began with Jesus' debate with the Pharisees in this chapter.

**From Jerusalem Pharisees and scribes** is significant, because, whereas every city of Jewish population had its Pharisees from almost every walk of life, these guardians of righteousness stir forth from the capital with their own theologians in tow. However, this is not the first time these bloodhounds trail Him. (Cf. Mk. 3:22; Lk. 5:17) Pharisean views were popularly held, because these rabbis, as Bowker (*Jesus and the Pharisees*, 31) observes,

... went as far as possible to make Torah practicable for all the people, but they nevertheless insisted ultimately on the observance of Torah. The people welcomed the assistance of the Hakamim



[i.e., scholars] in alleviating the strictest interpretations of Torah and in defending their traditional ways, but many of them were by no means prepared to submit their lives to the whole detail of Torah . . .

Bowker (*ibid.* 30) also notices the tension existing between the scholars and the common people who by no means necessarily went all the way to accept every detail of scholarly interpretation in their own lives. Since it was the scholars' design to define the Law so that, theoretically, ordinary people could actually achieve a condition of holiness as defined in the Law, and since they extended their influence over the people through education in the synagogues whereby their exegesis and applications of the Law molded the popular mind, naturally, any evidence of weakening or lowering of the traditional interpretations or standards would be viewed by the Pharisees as an instant threat to the holiness of Israel. As our text will amply demonstrate, Jesus posed a grave menace to the Pharisees on the following grounds:

1. He ignored tradition as a question of conscience. This is no small issue, since, as Bowker (*ibid.* 17f, emphasis added) points out:

The basic obligation of searching out the meaning and application of Torah was no easy matter. It was assisted by the recognition that Torah had already been applied and "lived out" by earlier figures from the time of the prophets, pre-eminently exemplified in the restoration of Torah under Ezra. Thus the notion of "Scripture" was as important as the acceptance of Torah, since with the writings coming from the later period, the first interpretations of the meaning of Torah could be found. Yet of course there was no reason in principle to stop at Ezra. [From our standpoint, however, it should be remembered that all previous men were inspired in various ways, hence, authoritative interpreters, whereas those following the time of Ezra, were neither inspired nor authoritative. HEF] In practice it proved necessary, not least because of the proliferation of "scriptures"; but in fact the important point was that *the earlier writings recorded the first implementations of Torah, and tradition continued the record in the "post-scriptural" period.* From this point of view, *the long tradition of what it has meant to obey Torah (and, equally, to disobey Torah) is in a sense as important as Torah itself.* Torah and

Scripture have a distinct status, but *the tradition of what Torah means in practice continued to be an essential part of exegesis.*

Thus, for Jesus to ignore tradition meant to reject, as it seemed to the scholars, one of the most essential tools of Biblical Interpretation.

2. Jesus seemed to side with the Sadducean philosophy of tradition. Surprisingly enough for Bible readers, the very fact that Jesus should reject tradition seemed automatically to align Him with the Sadducean attitude toward tradition. Bowker (*ibid.*, 18) notes that "the Sadducees denied the validity, both of the methods of Hakamic exegesis, and of the support which they gave to traditional ways of doing things, and . . . they insisted on the application of the literal text of Torah wherever possible . . ." (See also Josephus, *Ant.*, XIII, 10, 6.) Edersheim (*Life*, I, 313f) cautions that it would be a great historical inaccuracy to think that the Sadducees had no traditions at all, for "the Sadducees did not lay down the principle of absolute rejection of all traditions as such, but that they were opposed to traditionalism as represented and carried out by the Pharisees." (See also note on 15:9.) And, while Jesus' theology was not at all materialistic like that of the Sadducees, certainly He too opposed traditionalism as fostered and practiced by the Pharisees. They could not but feel that His anti-traditional attitude swung too much weight behind their opponents' policy.
3. Jesus was popular. Among all the preceding leading lights in Judaism the Pharisees enjoyed the popular vote and the deepest influence. (Cf. Mark's expression: "Pharisees and all the Jews," 7:3) But with the advent of Jesus, however, public opinion had begun to swing away from those Separatists and their minutiae. As Morgan (*Matthew*, 194) preaches:

The attractive power of Jesus Christ did not lie in the accidentals which appealed to a few; it was rather that of His essential humanity, which found an answer in all human life, notwithstanding the accidentals of birth and position and education.

So, when Jesus' prodigious popular ministry numbered thousands in His audiences and when He publicly flouted time-honored traditions, His fame and influence plainly signalled a revolution in public thought.

An exquisite passage in Josephus (*Ant.*, XIII, 10, 6), himself a Pharisee (cf. *Life*, 2), summarizes the Pharisean position as he understood it.

This "congressional investigating committee from Jerusalem" sought and soon found an opportunity to open fire. Because of the specific accusation involved in their attack and because their aggression begins in such close proximity to the feeding of the five thousand, it would be easy to consider their assault as somehow related to that event. The Jerusalem rabbis may well have remained stupefied by the magnitude of that miracle and all its glorious implications, until one of them, trying to imagine the event, wondered how such a mass of people could properly prepare themselves to eat by doing the prescribed washings. When he struck upon the probability that, out there in the wilderness, they could not have washed their hands in the "right" way, all the majesty of God that had been revealed in that stupendous miracle lost its luster in the (for them) more glorious discovery that Jesus' *disciples transgress the tradition of the elders, for they wash not their hands when they eat!*

The timing, if we have correctly understood it, as Matthew and Mark record it, coincides generally with the great Sermon on the Bread of Life delivered in the Capernaum synagogue. (Jn. 6) It was at the conclusion of that soul-testing pronouncement that Jesus' popularity in Galilee collapsed. In perfect concord with John's representation of that popularity crisis, the former Evangelists describe the theological issue of that same climax. (See the introductory critical notes on 14:34-36.) Their point is simple: the ultimate crisis of the cross arises out of this fundamental clash between Jesus' authoritative representation of God's will and His unequivocal rejection of Jewish tradition as inimical to proper fulfillment of God's will.

Mark (7:3, 4) provides the explanation of their contention, a fact that incidentally helps to determine to which readership Mark addressed his Gospel. Matthew omits entirely all explanations about Jewish purification rites, because they would have been perfectly familiar to those whom we have supposed to be his readers, the Hebrews themselves. Mark, in this case, probably needed to explain such matters to his audience, i.e., non-Jews. Because Mark asserts that "all the Jews do not eat unless they wash . . .," we may ask how many among Jesus' associates participated in God's laws on cleanliness and defilement?

1. Lepers kept themselves at a distance from people and cried,

"Unclean," not merely because their disease was contagious, but because of ceremonial defilement of others contacted by them. (Lk. 17:12f; Lev. 13:45f)

2. Mary and Joseph kept the law of birth purification. (Lk. 2:22f, 39)
3. A Jew argued with John's disciples about purification, (Jn. 3:22-30)
4. At the wedding feast in Cana plenty of water was furnished for the Jewish rites of purification. (Jn. 2:6)
5. Peter habitually ate "kosher" food. (Ac. 10:14)
6. The Pharisees themselves strictly avoided defilement and expected others to do the same. (Cf. Mt. 23:25ff; Lk. 7:39; Jn. 18:28)
7. Regulations about food, drink and various washing were a characteristic part of Judaism. (Cfr. Heb. 9:9f)

Because such ceremonious cleansing and ritual purity was so common in Jewish households, Mark's statement that "the Pharisees and all the Jews . . . wash" is not at all extreme, but historically exact. For interesting notes on the historical position of the Pharisees in Judaism, see Lynn Gardner's summary at the end of this chapter.

**15:2 saying, Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.** Note how astutely their denunciation is worded: they consider Jesus' disciples to be the living fruit of His ministry, the exemplification of His doctrine, almost as if they turned Jesus' own words against Him: "By their fruits you shall know them (false prophets)." This charge is serious, because it implies that Jesus Himself teaches His disciples to violate the rules, because the followers undoubtedly reflect Jesus' own views. (Cf. Lk. 11:38) On other occasions they had attempted without success to expose His miracles as worked by secret agreement with Satan. (See on 12:24ff; cf. 9:33f) Having been thoroughly embarrassed by His answers there, these experts now apparently make no effort to deny or "explain" the reality of His supernatural credentials upon which the authority for His claims and practice was based. These critics now blast the Lord where they suppose they can hurt Him worst: His disregarding their revered traditional practices. To believe wrongly is bad enough, but to teach others to ignore the accepted norms is infinitely worse. So, had the Pharisees only been theologically correct, their attack would have been rightly ordered and truly devastating.

This debate is fundamental, not peripheral, regardless of our western attitude toward the specific tabus involved here. Back of both Jesus' and the Pharisees' arguments is the basic concept of CLEANNES

and DEFILEMENT. We must never lose sight of the fact that the fundamental idea of defilement by eating "unclean foods," or by contact with "unclean objects or persons" was actually part of God's Law. (Cf. Lev. 5:2f; 7:19-21; 11; 13-15; 17:15f; 18; 19:31; 21:4, 11f; 22:1-9; Nu. 5:3; 6:9; 9:6f; 19:13, 20, 22; Dt. 21:22f; 14:3-21; 23:10-14) Once these laws are understood, the modern surprise that smiles at such carefulness in washing as that practiced among the Jews becomes unnecessary and unjustifiable.

Cleanness, simply stated, is that state in which man might not only worship or approach God, but also in which he might live in fellowship with his human society. Contrarily, uncleanness, impurity or defilement mean that he is in a state where this kind of worship or approach to God is impossible and his social relations with his fellows are hindered. So, this whole concept of clean and unclean has little, if anything, directly to do with physical cleanliness or hygiene, except perhaps indirectly and subordinately.

(Is it possible, on the other hand, that God considered literal, physical cleanness and hygiene, ALONG WITH MORAL, SPIRITUAL PURITY, as not only a condition of fellowship with Him, but also conducive to man's deeper happiness in his earthly condition? That is, is it possible that physical filth and corruption are also abhorrent to God because unrepresentative of His perfect creation in which "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good"? According to this understanding, then, even physical hygiene and removal of material filth become man's responsibility in order to keep himself physically proper for God's sight and ready for human comradeship. This view, while not at all denying that God has always intended that man keep himself morally pure, hence fit for divine and human fellowship, intends only to picture some of the Levitical washing laws as also intended to remove real dirt, germs and other filth that defile, disease or otherwise render a person unready for divine and human fellowship. Further, this view has the advantage of seeing the human being as a whole, composed of body and spirit, *both of which* must be pure and undefiled before God's holy presence and, thus, ready for human society.)

The concept of moral filth is also important to our understanding. (See Isa. 4:4; 64:6; 65:5; Lam. 1:8f, 17; Ezek. 22:15; 24:12f; 36:25; Ezra 9:11; Prov. 30:12) However, a careful examination of these passages and the above-mentioned laws will not render any specific

law that requires any Hebrew to wash his hands before meals. It is understandable, however, that the learned concept of a defilement that must be removed by washing should affect Jewish thinking so deeply as to find expression in the desire to eliminate even potential defilement. **GOD DID NOT COMMAND THE HANDWASHING RITUAL.**

Its institution was attributed to Solomon (*Shab.* 14b; on washing in general, cf. *Hag.* 2.4f; *Ber.* 14b, 15b, 22a; *Shab.* 14b) However, in a comment on Num. 18:7 in *Sifre*, sec. 116, it is argued that if a priest must bathe his hands before service in the Temple, so he must sanctify his hands before eating holy things in the country. For him to eat holy things is like the service in the Temple. Therefore, it is concluded, handwashing to eat food sanctified is required by the Torah. It should be noticed here that the very necessity to argue the case of handwashing puts in doubt the presumed Solomonic, hence, inspired, origin of the custom, as if it were not so Solomonic after all, despite the fact that it is said that, when he instituted handwashing, the Divine Voice (*Bath Qol*) came forth giving approval. (*Shab.* 14b) Bowker (*Jesus and the Pharisees*, 70) notes, further, that handwashing "was a matter of continuing controversy: even as late as the compilation of *B. Hull.* 105a it was not determined how much of the washing of hands was obligatory and how much meritorious"; and one man was treated as apostate because he threw doubt on cleansing of hands. (See *ISBE*, 415 on "Bath Kol" for an excellent discussion of the so-called "Divine Voice" concept that arose in Judaism after the cessation of true prophetism.)

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 13) agrees that immediately prior to Christ, Hillel and Shammai agreed on hand-washing and fixed the rabbinic views on this subject, even though it did not take on the force of universal authoritative tradition until the time of Christ. In this case, the hand-washing ordinance would have been a recent enactment which, by specific rabbinic rules, could not be questioned or invalidated.

Further, the precise report of the scribes' attack "affords most valuable indirect confirmation of the trustworthiness of his Gospel, as not only showing intimate familiarity with the minutiae of Jewish 'tradition,' but giving prominence to what was then a present controversy—and all this the more, that it needs intimate knowledge of that law even fully to understand the language of the Evangelist." (Edersheim, *Life*, II, 14f)

However much in harmony with the concept of Biblical cleanness and defilement the hand-washing ritual may have logically fit, it is of human, not divine, origin. However well it may have seemed to instill in people a sense of what was common, profane or unclean and what was sanctified or holy (cf. Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26), still it was human judgment that decided it so. Further, whereinssofar each single Hebrew freely chose to wash his hands before eating food in full awareness of the contamination that pollutes the soul and can only be washed by the blood of perfect sacrifices and as a symbol of that cleansing, there could be no valid argument against such a free, independent, personal decision. Here, even the Christian laws of personal liberty would fully permit this personal choice. However, the rabbis had elevated their interpretation to the status of authoritative custom possessed of special value or merit within itself in the service of God, and by this move they took the act out of the realm of free, personal choice and placed it in the realm of law.

To appreciate the seriousness and apparent justice of the Pharisees' question, we must see that Judaism in general viewed the Mosaic Law as consisting of two equally essential parts: the written Law, i.e., the Pentateuch, and the oral, or traditional, Law. The former was penned by Moses and commented upon by the prophets. The latter, or oral law, was supposedly whispered by God to Moses and handed down only in oral form, never reduced to writing until the second century after Christ in the Mishnah (collected around 132-200 A.D.) and developed by "Haggadah" or additional comments, illustrations, anecdotes and wise sayings, "Halakah," or casuistry, traditional ordinances, logical legal deductions and finally collected in the "Talmudim" in the third and fourth centuries after Christ.

The essential difficulty of the Jews lay in their undifferentiated view of traditions. They could rightly cite "prophetic precedents" for some practical interpretations of the law, as, for example, Nehemiah's city ordinance that protected Sabbath observance in Jerusalem (Neh. 13:15-22), Ezra's marriage reforms (Ez. 10; Neh. 13:23ff), Malachi's pronouncements on divorce (Mal. 2:13-16) and others. These illustrate how the Law was to be interpreted. However, they failed to see that THESE "traditional interpretations" were made by prophets or by inspired men, an observation that cannot with justice be made for those traditions born of common, uninspired attempts to interpret and apply the Law. It was the assumption that the intertestamental elders' opinions carried as much weight as that of inspired prophets that got them into this difficulty. This

is the reason why the *Bath Qol* concept was so malicious a doctrine: it gave apparent divine sanction to purely human notions!

Jesus' entire argument, that their traditions (on hand-washing supposedly attributed to Solomon) annul the Word of God, flatly denies the Solomonic paternity of that custom, hence of the traditional authority upon which it was based. Affirmations that these oral traditions were given by God to Moses and handed down unerringly and uninterruptedly to Jesus' contemporaries, must, of course, be documented. But the bad joke on "oral tradition" is that when it is documented, it is no longer "oral" but written, and, if written, subject to the same tests as any other written document, subject to the same historical verification as any other report of things that are said to be. Unconfirmed Mishnaic affirmations that the traditions were handed down through a given chain of authorities must not be accepted without proof. (Cf. *Aboth*. 1:1-4 or *Tosefta*: *Yad* 2:16) Other than these allegations, is there any trustworthy documentary evidence that PROVES a greater antiquity for these traditions than the post-exilic period? This is not to say that the rabbis did not even try to document and/or antedate their traditions. In fact, rabbinic defence of oral tradition as "essentially Mosaic" took the route of:

1. Warped exegesis of texts like Dt. 4:14 and Ex. 24:12, whereby the attempts are made to identify the Mishnah and the Talmud hidden in words of these texts. Hosea 8:12 is supposed to mean that God did not write all of His Law, hence, if He wished Israel to know it, it was passed down by oral tradition, i.e., unwritten, and nonetheless authentic and authoritative. (Edersheim, *Life*, I, 99)
2. Confusion of local judicial decisions for revelations from God forever binding the conscience of all succeeding generations. (Study Dt. 17:8-13)

But this is far from proving Mishnaic assertions, like those of *Aboth*. i.1-4, or *Yad*. ii. 16 (*Tosefta*), that presume to list a few of the "elders."

This is why the Pharisees' charge must never be dismissed as simple sectarian punctiliousness, as if they could not find any greater misdemeanor than this, whereas the disciples of Jesus truly conducted themselves so inoffensively that this was the very worst accusation that could be levelled against them. To think this way is to miss the point of what it means to BELIEVE IN "INSPIRED TRADITIONS!" Equally erroneous is any sniggering about a Rabbi Jose's determination "that to eat with unwashed hands is as great a sin as adultery,"



because his view is perfectly consistent with his belief in the divine origin and authority of both ordinances, the former being decided by a Voice from heaven (*Bath Qol*), the latter by a written commandment at Sinai. He is not seeking to distinguish what is essential from what is non-essential in what he believes (wrongly, we think) to be God's Word. The rabbi's mistake is in believing that God inspired or authorized the tradition about hand-washing.

### B. JESUS COUNTERATTACKS (15:3-20; Mk. 7:6-23)

#### 1. Before the Pharisees: "You break God's Law to keep your rules!"

15:3 **Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? Ye also:** this is no mere *ad hominem* argument whereby Jesus defends the practice of His disciples by pointing out that the Pharisees are also culpable. *Ye also* admits the disciples' guilt, but with the vast difference that, whereas the disciples were confessedly guilty of ignoring human traditions, the critics themselves were liable for a far more serious crime, not against men, but against the living God! Morgan (*Matthew*, 196) is right to observe that, had He excused the disciples or suggested that, after all, they had not violated tradition, He would tacitly have admitted that tradition as such was not so blameable, but was, rather, the commonly accepted norm. But by saying "*Ye also*," He admitted this violation of tradition, thus opening the way to attack tradition as normative. Note that He never objects to the traditional hand-washing as a custom. Rather, He firmly refused to recognize it as a conscience-binding rule of religion.

An important question to consider now is whether the Pharisees of any age set out deliberately to *transgress the commandment of God in order to keep their traditions*. There is a type of Pharisee that finds it undesirable to observe some command of God, and so deliberately sets it aside, hoping to make up for his failure by being extra scrupulous at some other point. This, it is assumed, will compensate for his refusal to observe the other precept. At last, this kind of compensation can so deaden his conscience that it no longer rebukes his disobedience, since, after all, it is supposedly covered by his severe strictness elsewhere. But may it be assumed that this kind of deliberate disobedience is intended here? Since Jesus is dealing with people whose reliance is upon the Law and whose boast is

their relation to God, who know His will and approve what is excellent (cf. Ro. 2:17ff), their failure may well be found in their blindness, i.e., their inability to conceive the possibility that their own rules, invented to "protect and correctly apply" God's Law, could actually transgress that Law. (However, see also on 15:6.)

It may be that these legalists were not at all intending to ignore any part of God's Word in their attention to tradition, because their declared purpose for creating these "fences to hedge in the Law" was to protect it against violation. However, their scrupulous observance of human traditional practice led surely and directly to a corresponding negligence and unscrupulousness regarding God's Word. Thus, the entire procedure was a question of ATTENTION. (Cf. notes on 13:9) By their elaborate arguments they gave close attention to human procedures, debating trifles and treated as matters of conscience what could never affect nor effect inward purity. But, by so doing, they unconsciously turned their attention away from the very laws of God they proposed to interpret and obey! Here is another case where, had they given attention to God's preferences for "mercy and not sacrifice" (see on 9:13 and 12:7), they would not have forgotten nor ignored true morality by insisting on such arbitrary interpretations and rituals.

It is because of this "traditionalist mentality," this inability to see how far human rules and attempts at interpretation can really supplant God's will, that Jesus attacks the whole system of tradition. The key to understanding this entire discourse and its proper application in our own case lies in 15:9. What is perhaps most damning is that attitude taken in the Mishnah (*Sanh.* xi. 3): "It is more punishable to act against the words of the Scribes than against the Scripture." (quoted by Edersheim, *Sketches*, 223) This explains why Jesus could never treat traditionalism with indifference! (Cf. Jer. 8:8) Not only was failure to comply with their rules perfectly legitimate: direct opposition to them was a duty! At every point where human authority competes with God's, it must not only be accepted. It must be resisted.

By saying *your tradition*, the Lord renders those rabbis immediately and personally responsible for the customary usages they hold and teach as conscience-binding rules. Even though these impositions are the inventions of others (*the elders*), those who uphold and pass them on are equally liable for having followed their guides. (See on 15:14; cf. Mich. 6:16.) By characterizing their procedure as *transgressing the commandment of God*. Jesus warns His followers against

the evil consequences of men's imposing their strictures upon others, because, while initially seeming only to restrict the freedom of action enjoyed by Christ's disciples, they proceed to become laws where God not only made none, but deliberately left men free to decide spontaneously and responsibly.

While it is certainly true and probably right to affirm, with some, that while Jesus' clash with the Pharisees is a collision between two views of religion, between externalism and spiritual religion, and while the great defect of rabbinism was to make sin so merely external that an act was considered right or wrong depending upon the presence or absence of some external condition, yet the fundamental problem, according to the Lord, is not externalism as such. This supreme religious contest is waged over the fundamental problem of **AUTHORITY IN RELIGION**: shall it be human or divine? Shall we break God's Law to keep men's or vice versa? Externalism is but one symptom and a result of the even greater defect, i.e., teaching as obligatory what is but the precept of men. Externalism is only admissible where human authority has already begun to take precedence over God's.

**15:4 For God said, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, He that speaketh evil of father or mother, let him die the death.** (Ex. 20:12; 21:17) *For God said* is Jesus' final word on the divine paternity of the passages in question. His word cannot be laughed off as mere "cultural accommodation to the popular prejudices and traditional understanding of Pentateuchal authorship." For those who have ears to hear Jesus, He makes a clear-cut distinction between human traditions, as followed by the elders of the Pharisees, and the Word of God as a divine, infallible guide. This should warn all scholars everywhere that for Jesus Christ the indisputably right author of Exodus is really Moses (Mk. 7:10) and God (Mt. 15:4). It would be crushingly ironic, were Jesus, in His argument against human traditions that He regards as mistaken, however well received on ancient authority, to cite what, according to modern criticism of the Old Testament, turns out to be nothing better than human tradition! By such standards, Jesus Himself must be seen to fall into the same confusion of which He accused His opponents! (See also on 15:7 where He points to Isaiah as the real author of his prophecy.) But if the Lord may be credited with even average rationality, He could have seen that the validity of His arguments **DEPENDED** upon the unquestionably divine origin and traceable transmission of the citations He adduces. It is in this kind of context that the afore-mentioned

thesis of some "scholarly" criticism fails its most crucial test by refusing to permit Jesus to testify in an area where He is most qualified to speak. Either Jesus said this or He did not. If He said it, then the critics cannot affirm that His quotations and indications of prophetic paternity and divine inspiration of the OT books represent merely the traditional beliefs of the Jewish people. It is false to accuse the Lord of having refused to declare Himself on such critical Old Testament questions, thus leaving such matters for the relatively recent European scholarship to decide, when, as a matter of fact, He is actually discussing traditions.

For Matthew to quote Jesus as saying, "For God said . . .," while at this same point Mark (7:10) says, "For Moses said . . ." creates no contradiction, because the Lord may have actually said both; "For God through Moses commanded, saying . . ." In this case, the Evangelists simplify these introductory words, since both recognize Moses' divine mandate and God's human agent.

**Honor thy father and thy mother**, according to Jesus, is a command with life-long obligations. No amount of physical maturity can ever release the children from due respect for their parents, because *honor* has no terminal limits. In fact, *honor* means, among other things, to maintain them with daily sustenance. (Cf. 1 Ti. 5:3-17; Eph. 6:1-3) Jesus honored His earthly parents and cared for His mother as best He could. (Lk. 2:51; Jn. 19:26f) **He that speaketh evil of father or mother, let him die the death.** Edersheim, (*Life*, II, 21) notices this typically rabbinical method in Jesus' answer by which He mentioned, along with the precept, the penalty for its transgression. This detail has evidential value in that it reveals the Master's intimate knowledge of His people's traditional manner of teaching the Law. He is no ignorant iconoclast. Rather, He meets the scribes on their own grounds, reads them their own Scriptures and leaves them self-condemned. Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 211) reminds:

The sin of cursing parents is here opposed to the duty of honouring them. Those who speak ill of their parents, or wish ill to them, who mock at them, or give them taunting and opprobrious language, break this law. If to call a brother *Raca* be so penal, what is it to call a father so? By our Saviour's application of this law, it appears, that denying service or relief to parents is included in cursing them. Though the language be respectful enough, and nothing abusive in it, yet what will that avail, if the deeds be not agreeable? It is like him that said, *I go, Sir, and went not.* ch. xxi. 30.

God had placed reverence for parents on the same level with Israel's national and personal holiness and in context with the sanctity of the sabbath and with the proper worship of God. (See Lev. 19:3f.) It is because the majesty of God, violated in this disrespect for the persons of the parents that the sin of cursing them is made punishable with death. All of God's representatives are to be served with honor and fear, because in this commandment lies the foundation for order in the whole social realm. Here God teaches us to acknowledge rightful authority by showing proper reverence in thought, word and deed. Out of this understanding of the true positions of father and child grows our appreciation of, and demand for, good government and, consequently, our grasp of the Kingdom of God. This relationship is so fundamental, because it gives moral character and stability to a nation, and prosperity and well-being to its people. Thus, the failure adequately to value this parent-child relationship, especially through the grown son's refusal to support his aging parents, is direct evidence of a fundamental moral decline in appreciation for the majesty and authority of God. Not only is the image of God in the parents no longer kept sacred, but the Word and authority of God are also ignored. This is why refusal to support one's parents in their helplessness and senility is a sin worthy of capital punishment under the Mosiac system.

**15:5 But ye say:** Here is written the condemnation of every false religion, because, notwithstanding the fact that God has spoken, men think they can still have their say! By so thinking, they permitted a scribal rule to wipe out one of the Ten Commandments! Here Jesus quoted God's Law, and then threw the rabbinical position into sharp contrast with it. Consider, however, what is involved when He quotes a command of God and then throws His own word into contrast with it. (Cf. Mt. 5:21f, 27f, 31f, 33f, 38f, 43f) In the former case, the Jews had no divine authority to make any alteration in God's Law; in the latter, however, Jesus Himself was God's Word come in human flesh to reveal God's changes of emphasis. (Cf. Jn. 1:14, 17f)

Why Jesus should select this particular illustration to deal with the rabbis' attack is understood differently by commentators. McGarvey (*Matthew-Mark*, 134) thinks:

This example did not touch the question of uncleanness, but it proved that tradition was an unauthoritative and mischievous guide, and as the objection of the scribes was based on the

authority of tradition, it destroyed the force of an objection. The particular tradition about eating with unwashed hands is discussed on its merits in the next paragraph: principles are settled first, and details afterward.

However, Edersheim (*Life*, II, 19), on the basis of a Talmudic comment that may well represent earlier rabbinical thought, believes Jesus to have seen an association of ideas between the Pharisees' accusation about washing of hands and "the hand of Corban":

The Talmud explains that, when a man simply says: 'That (or, if) I eat or taste such a thing,' it is imputed as a vow, and he may not eat or taste of it, 'because the hand is on the Qorban' (*Jer. Nedar.* 36d, line 22)—the mere touch of Qorban had sanctified it, and put it beyond his reach, just as if it had been laid on the altar itself. Here, then, was a contrast. According to the Rabbis, the touch of 'a common' hand defiled God's good gift of meat, while the touch of 'a sanctified' hand in rash or wicked words might render it impossible to give anything to a parent, and so involved the grossest breach of the Fifth Commandment! Such, according to Rabbinic Law, was the 'common' and such the 'sanctifying' touch of the hands . . .

In any case, the fundamental principle involved is the concept of vows. Mark (7:11) underlies this by bringing into his Gospel a Hebrew word he then has to translate for his uninformed readers: "Corban (that is, Given to God)." What is this *Corban*-concept? Was the *Corban*-clause a deliberate ploy to avoid responsibility to parents, or was it not, rather, just another apparently correct application or interpretation of divine Law, that, however apparently orthodox in intention, was used in actual practice to justify just this same sort of inhumanity scored by Jesus here? Thus, regardless of its original intention or regardless of the sincerity of the human authors who started this tradition, it was used to subvert God's commands. If we would avoid the same trap, we need to understand:

1. The Biblical revelations that formers of the *Corban*-clause could cite for its correctness. Consider the following passages and see if you too come out with any other conclusion than that, once a person has promised to give God something, he is duty-bound to do so; Num. 30:2; Lev. 19:12; 27; Dt. 23:21-23; Prov. 20:25; Eccl. 5:2, 4-6; Zech. 8:16f.
2. The human arguments for the *Corban*-clause. Since it would be

necessary to distinguish between a loosely-stated half-intention and a solemn promise, it may be that the Jews decided that a vow had not been made unless the person should affirm: "It is given" (= *Corban*). This would establish clearly in the minds of all that a solemn oath has been pronounced. Naturally, no one who made this serious affirmation before God would consider breaking the oath once made. Therefore it stood as valid, and any failure to maintain it would be equal to taking God's Name in vain and so the man would be held liable before God.

3. The fatal flaw in the *Corban*-doctrine. The precepts governing oaths presume that a person is actually free to give to the Lord what he voluntarily promises. (Dt. 23:23) But, if God has already obligated a man to use his possessions differently than he might have vowed, then is he no longer free to vow them to the Lord. He must use them as God commanded, as, for example, to care for his aged parents. He must not vow them at all, for to vow them brings them under the law of oaths which require that he pay what he had no right even to promise, thus bringing one of God's laws into contradiction with another of His laws. But God had left a way out: REPENTANCE of the oath and SACRIFICE for the sin of having thus to break it! (Lev. 5:4-6) Further, the possession thus vowed could actually be redeemed from the Lord by adding 20% to its value, (Lev. 27) These two steps made it possible to obey God and care for one's parents, despite the ill-taken oath.

(The fact that a father might cancel a vow made by a daughter, by forbidding her fulfilling it, suggests the principle that filial obedience to a father stands higher in God's eyes than carrying out her self-imposed religious service. See Lev. 30:3-5)

4. The positive perniciousness of the *Corban*-doctrine: The fact that God had not revealed the *Corban*-concept should warn against its ever being considered all-inclusive and absolute, lest anyone abuse God's other revelations in ways of which he may yet be unaware. This *Corban*-concept, when blindly and absolutely carried to its severely logical extreme, could not but actually encourage people to neglect morality because of a religious quibble, a punctilious principle, and so pave the way for that spiritual deterioration that ends in unembarrassed iniquity.

Is it true that the man who pronounced the magic word, *Corban*,

not only avoided thereby his obligation to support his parents, but could at the same time continue to enjoy the comforts and use of his own possessions although vowed to the service of God? If this sham dedication was as common as the real, Jesus' denunciation adequately touches both cases.

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 18ff, emphasis added) states that what might be suspected about the common usage of language, held true even in the case of Corban. "It must not be thought that the pronunciation of the votive word 'Qorban,' . . . necessarily dedicated a thing to the Temple. The meaning might simply be, and generally was, that *it was to be regarded LIKE Qorban*—that is, that in regard to the person or persons named, the thing termed was to be considered AS IF it were Qorban, laid on the altar, and put entirely out of their reach." Accordingly, what is involved here is not so much a consecration to God, but an oath of personal obligation, and binding, even though it involve a breach of the Law. (*Nedar*, ii, 2)

If no real service to God is intended, how much more wicked is the selfish son who talks this way!

So, human need, according to Jesus, takes precedence over any rites and ceremonies, especially those of admittedly human origin. For God is not so much interested in precise and punctual performance of ceremonies as He is in relieving human suffering and making men over in His image. It is increasingly important today to remember that God thinks SOME ceremonies to be beautifully fitted to accomplish these high goals. He admits no false dichotomy between ceremonies and merciful helpfulness, because He knows that He can have BOTH. (See notes on 9:13.) Jesus' words must never be distorted to mean that ceremonies, like baptism, the Lord's Supper, congregational worship and such, may be safely dispensed with as somehow unimportant, and perhaps even detrimental because susceptible of becoming empty ceremonialisms. In the case of ceremonies which God has ordained, a Scriptural case could be made for the spiritual benefits accruing to the sincere disciple who participates in them. (Cf. *Psa.* 51:16-19) So, before concluding that we may decide to sacrifice ceremonies to morality on the basis of something we think Jesus means in this text, we must recall that He intends "morality" in the sense of what God defines as morality. No arbitrary decision of ours about what constitutes morality may disagree with His, for to ignore His decisions about ceremonies is immoral.



Note the general principle that not even gifts given to God Himself can close His eyes to the inhumanity and disobedience of selfish hearts. (Cf. Dt. 10:17; 1 Sam. 15:22) Here were men who were trying to be so holy that they could not use their "holy" money to obey the command of God! Any money given to God today usually and rightly goes to help some human being. He does not need our money. (Mic. 6:6-8; Psa. 50:10-15) So, logically, it must be used to help people. Further, in the sense that the aged parents had the right to expect filial support, the traditional interpretation of the rabbis was a violation of human rights.

15:6 **He shall not honor his father.** These words belong grammatically to the words of the traditionalists, but it may well be asked whether they ever said this in so many words.

1. Lenski (*Matthew*, 585) comments that "the remark that the Pharisees would scarcely have contradicted the Fourth (sic) Commandment so flatly does honor to Christian feeling but fails to understand the Pharisees."
2. Farrar (*Life*, 338, note 2) notes that "some of the rabbis had expressly taught that a vow superseded the necessity of obedience to the fifth commandment." That they actually so taught is documented in the Mishnah, (*Nedar*, ii. 2; ix. 1; v), only collected in the late second century A.D.

Accordingly, it is possible to credit the Pharisees with having taken the extreme position whereby the *Corban*-principle actually transcended the Fifth Commandment and codified it into law by the time of the Mishnah collection, whereas in Jesus' time it may have been in the formative stage. Had the common non-Pharisee said in so many words, *He shall not honor his father*, his rejection of God's commandment would be obvious, because expressed in language so nearly equal to God's that it called attention to it. Rather, in Christ's time, they may have decided simply: "Anyone who pronounces 'Corban' over his property is obligated thereby not to use its value for any other purpose not consonant with its dedication to the Temple." If this were the case, then Jesus slices away all the rule's apparent legality by pointing to an application so evident, so practical and so vicious, that none but the willfully blind could deny it. The purpose of God's Temple is to express His concern that men learn to live not only holy lives before God, but also to learn to love and honor one another. What a tragedy that one's own parents should be shut out of God's plan for their care in their senior years by a

deliberate misuse of God's plans! Knofel Staton (*Perfect Balance*, 83), applying this text, rightly challenges:

Do we consider a person's provisions to his needy parents a part of "church" giving? (Read 1 Timothy 5:1-16) What kind of witness do Christians give to unbelievers when we turn the care of our parents over to the government? Is God happy that our faith-promise pledge is high while our care for our parents is nil?

Unless we remain sensitive to what God desires, we too may buy the rubbish of the rabbis by letting some magic oath, some home-made, ax-grinding rule release men from a God-ordained obligation.

Jesus' conclusion: **And ye have made void the word of God because of your tradition.** Again Jesus' emphasis is on the personal responsibility of those who follow the tradition: "*your tradition* which you hand on. And many such things you do." (Mk. 7:13) Edersheim (*Life*, II, 17) notes that

It was an admitted Rabbinic principle that, while the ordinances of Scripture required no confirmation, those of the Scribes needed such, [Babylonian Talmud, *R.H.* 18b, cf. Bowker, p. 135] and that no Halakhah [i.e. traditional law] might contradict Scripture. (*Jer. Taan.* 66a)

From this standpoint, therefore, Jesus not only proved that on this critical issue and in many others (Mk. 7:13), the scribes' traditional views contradicted or vitiated the Law of God, but He was also arguing on grounds perfectly acceptable to the scribes themselves, and by their own rules they stood self-condemned!

**Your tradition:** points to the human origin and transmission of such rules. Accordingly, not every traditional practice comes under the condemnation of the Lord, because there do exist good and true traditions, defined as such by their ORIGIN. (Cf. 1 Co. 15:3 "I delivered = *parédoka*"; 11:2, 23; 2 Th. 2:15; 3:6; Jude 3 "delivered," *paradositheise*; 2 Pt. 2:21 "delivered") This very distinction in ORIGIN signals the chasm that separates acceptable from unacceptable traditions: are they from God, i.e. delivered (or handed down) by the prophets and apostles? If so, accept and obey, cherish and teach them. Are they products of human reasoning? If so, beware of elevating them to the level of divine authority, since they may be found to promote violations of God's Word. Of course, they may not too, since they may be nothing more than the good, practical ways of understanding and applying God's Word in a given period.

Their ever-present weakness is their humanness.

A modern illustration may serve here. The Holy Spirit describes Christian baptism in the New Testament as the burial in water of a penitent believer for the forgiveness of his sins, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16; Ac. 2:38; 8:38f; 22:16 *et al.*) Over the centuries, however, it has become traditional to acknowledge as valid baptism some other act:

1. which consists in nothing more than a sprinkling of water on the head of a baby that cannot believe, repent or confess personal faith in Jesus Christ;
2. or, which, in other cases, while being performed by immersion has no vital connection with a salvation that has, according to its practioners, already occurred in the believer, hence is not absolutely essential to receive remission of sins, the gift of the Spirit, eternal life, etc.
3. or is eliminated altogether as a superfluous relic of a bygone age.

Whenever human traditions dare say that anything else is just as good as, or just as saving as, what God requires, they fall under the same condemnation Jesus levels against those who *made void the word of God because of their traditions*. We ought therefore to have a holy fear of any religious system that affirms that ANYTHING is required for our becoming Christians or for maturing our spiritual life, more than the commandment of Christ or the Apostles. Not even men's best applications or extension of meaning of Scripture will do, because no time at all is required for these to become a tradition which rivals God's Word, no matter how well grounded in good reasons those applications might once have been.

15:7 **Ye hypocrites** is Jesus' epithet for them, perhaps to avoid calling them moral imbeciles. The justifications for His judgment are multiple:

1. They had condemned Jesus' disciples for ignoring human traditions, while they themselves, because of their devotion to those human opinions, disobeyed God's Word, while pretending great devotion to God!
2. So painfully careful about ceremonial defilement of hands and household articles, they ignored the real pollution of the heart by their sins and their bold contradictions of God's Word.

3. They pretended to the teaching, judging office, whereas they had become incapable of discerning what is vital in morality! Intolerantly, they made mere trifles into matters superior to justice, mercy, faith and obedience to God! Morality was sacrificed to ritual.
4. By their attitude they were expecting that men consider them as holy as they ought to be before God, but they were not. In their self-deception they had arrived at the point where they actually considered themselves to be what they only pretended to be.

**Isaiah prophesied well of you hypocrites**, not in the sense that he said something predictive about the Pharisees personally, but in the sense that what he affirmed of the hypocrites of his own day, taken as a class, so well describes you, because, by your actions, you have placed yourselves in that class. **Ye hypocrites** form a class so large that your colleagues were the object of God's reproof in Isaiah's day, and what He said about your crowd rings true about you younger members of that notorious crew! How unchangeable is God's ethics: seven centuries had not made any difference in morality: hypocrisy was an abomination to God in the historical context of both Isaiah and Jesus Christ. Here is evidence of an underlying unity in the moral realm that should give us pause when we boast of great moral achievements, lest we think we have discovered something the prophets were already preaching centuries before Christ!

**Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites:** "Before attaching so much weight to the beliefs and doctrines of the ancients which you cite against me, you should honestly and critically examine what God's inspired prophets were saying about them when those ancients actually lived!" The ancients had failed to grasp the futility of punctilious performance of HUMAN prescriptions and commands as if they were the expression of true worship and submission to God's Word. *The elders* and their children had followed them blindly, disregarding how far those human regulations led them away from the way of righteousness and true godliness. Therefore, because the Pharisees pretended to accept the prophecies of Isaiah, it was easy for the Lord to destroy the presumed authority of the elders who had ignored God's revelations, since Isaiah had already scored their blindness in his day. His accusations are multiple:

1. **HEARTLESS FORMALISM: This people honoreth me with their lips; But their heart is far from me.**

2. SELF-DECEPTION and consequent FUTILITY: **In vain do they worship me.**
3. SUBSTITUTION: **Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men.**

What was wrong? Missing were the essential ingredients of true worship and a right approach to God: concentration on God and His revealed will.

1. They did not approach God in the right spirit (Jn. 4:23f)
  - a. There must be a longing love to meet God in Christ through real adoration. Hypocrites have less interest in obedience and loyalty to a revelation than they do their own ideas. In effect, they worship self when they give absolute value to their own exalted opinions.
  - b. There must be a consequent humility that permits a true self-evaluation before God. Hypocrites' prayers no longer evidence their dependence upon God, because THEY need no grace, no power, nor guidance. (Cf. 2 Ti. 3:5; Isa. 1:11-20; 1 Sam. 15:15, 22f; Psa. 51:16f; Prov. 21:3, 27; 15:8; 28:9)
  - c. There must be a capacity to be compassionate toward any of God's creatures who is lost without God or who otherwise needs God's merciful help expressed through His people. Hypocrites can only look down in unmoving pity upon such unfortunates beneath their level. They think: "If God blesses the good and curses the bad, then to help those staggering under the curse of common human problems which I don't have would overturn God's judgment against them. Better leave them alone to suffer!" We must not put religious pride above human need by caring only about the rigid preservation of our system. (Jas. 1:26f)
2. They did approach God in truth. (Cf. Jn. 4:23f)
  - a. We must approach God according to the truth of God. This means, therefore, the right use of those forms of worship and service that are acceptable to God. A real love for God expresses itself, among other things, by adoring and serving Him by observing those ceremonials which He has instituted. (Cf. Ac. 17:30f; Ro. 10:1-3) Hypocrites, on the other hand, lay great stress on these ceremonials, because, being external, they can be counterfeited, thus gaining for those who do them credit for holiness in the eyes of those they seek to impress. (Cf. Ezek. 33:30-33; contrast Jeroboam's false worship: 1 Kg. 13:25—14:6) But where man's heart truly seeks the living God, even the

- external forms are acceptable and accepted because founded upon God's truth. (See 1 Co. 10:14-33; 2 Co. 11:1-15; Gal. 1:6-10; 4:1-11; 5:1-14; Col. 2:16-23; Jude; Mt. 23:1-39; Lu. 11:37-52.)
- b. We must approach God in sincerity, with a true heart, in truth.
- (1) The presence of sin in one's life indicates a heart that is far from God. (Mt. 5:19f; Isa. 59:2) Every failure of self-discipline that refuses to eliminate the causes of true impurity invites self-corruption and, at the end, self-destruction. We must learn to hate sin's power to corrupt our conscience and pollute our motives and undermine our will.
  - (2) True purification of heart must eliminate the true uncleanness, sin. (Heb. 9:13f; 10:14, 22; Ac. 8:22; 1 Pt. 1:2, 22; 1 Jn. 1:5-9)

15:9 **But in vain do they worship me.** *In vain (mâten)* is an expression rich in significance to describe human worship founded solely upon human precepts: It is "vain, wrong, useless, stupid, without motive, reason or wisdom; audacious, false, deceitful" (Rocci, 1186). Such religion is specifically folly, because it imposes upon its adherents a carefulness and rigor that accomplishes precisely nothing except make them uncomfortable, sensitive to trifles, ascetic, hypercritical and intolerant. Further, because such severe self-abasement has no relation to reality, because only what God says is reality, these human demands leave men ignorant of reality, subject to self-deception and superstition.

But why should the spiritually withering and eternally unsatisfying external ceremonies commanded by *the precepts of men* be actually preferred to the wholesome requirements of God?

1. Because ceremonies can be seen and experienced by him who does them, and they satisfy him more easily and sooner than the slow, inner, invisible growth in godliness.
2. Because ceremonies are visible to others, there is also self-satisfaction in being praised as godly by them.
3. Observing rites is far easier than the slow maturing in righteousness and walking with God, having the courage to repent and deny oneself of such easy satisfactions.

15:9 **But in vain do they worship me:** Isaiah and Jesus pronounce the unmitigated futility of such hypocrisy, because great zeal for *precepts of men* can never guarantee anyone that God is pleased or served. (Cf. Ro. 10:1-3) Here is written also the final doom of such hypocrisy, because, since it never produces any result that pleases

God, He has, in effect, never been worshipped nor served by such people. Why should He embrace them in His Kingdom?

While it is well to see that Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 29:13 differs from the standard translation as we have it directly from Hebrew in our Bible, it should be remembered that two factors enter in to explain the difference:

1. Jesus is giving an interpretative paraphrase of Isaiah, showing, even while quoting, how the quotation itself applies to the situation. Such interpretative quotations were common in Judaism, the so-called Targums. (See ISBE, 2910ff; Edersheim, *Life*, I, 206)
2. Since His quotation, with but minor changes in word order, approximates more closely the Septuagint, we must remember that the LXX translates into Greek a Hebrew text that, being far more ancient, hence even more accurate, than our available Hebrew manuscripts of this passage, Jesus might thus be quoting the more accurate reading.

Compare them together:

ISAIAH (Hebrew)	ISAIAH (Greek)	JESUS
Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote.	This people draws near me They honor me with their lips, But their heart is far away from me, In vain they worship me Teaching commandments of men and doctrines.	This people honors me with the lips, But their heart is far away from me, In vain they worship me Teaching (as) doctrines commandments of men.

The critical question raised by these readings is: who are the "men" whose commandments are intended: mere humans who never enjoyed inspiration, or God's men treated as mere humans? The implications of either reading are the same, because, following the Hebrew, God's religion ("Their fear of me"), as far as an annoyed Israel was concerned, had become nothing but a boring series of commandments, just a lesson to be memorized. Consequently, their religious practice

was purely perfunctory and habitual, without conviction, because the majesty and authority of God had been forgotten and the words of His prophets were then treated at the merely human level. If we follow the Greek, the prophet is complaining of human opinions being exalted to the level of divine doctrine. Either way, therefore, whether God's Word is debased to the human level, or human doctrines are enthroned beside divine revelation, the same tragic results occur.

As noted above at 15:1, the Pharisees are not alone in following human doctrines, because the Sadducees had their own real traditions too. (See Edersheim, *Life*, I, 313f and note 1.) It would have been impossible, in fact, for Luke (Ac. 23:8) to state so clearly their distinctively unbiblical position, had they had absolutely no opinions, no interpretations of Scripture, no philosophy of Law, etc., that marked them out as a separate school of thought (*hairesis*) among the Jews. Whether they accepted ALL the OT or only the Pentateuch, they too come under Jesus' condemnation, because there is enough in those five books to demonstrate the fallacy of their stated views on angels. (Cf. Gen. 16:7-11; 19:1, 15; 22:11, 15; 32:1f; Ex. 3:2; Nu. 22:22-35) Jesus argued against their rejection of the resurrection, from Ex. 3:6 (Mt. 22:32 and par.). Even a later Pharisean rabbi, Gamaliel II, argued from Dt. 1:8 that a resurrection would have to be implied, since the promise was made, not "to you" but "to them." (See Edersheim, *Life*, I, 316; II, 403 for *Sanh.* 90b where another rabbi argued the same from Ex. 6:4.)

**Teaching as doctrine the precepts of men** is the precious key to understanding this entire discourse, and, consequently, the clue to its proper application in our own case. This, because even in the law of Christ revealed in the NT, there are many, many details that Christ and the Apostles have not revealed; details that we would like to know in order to complete our obedience to that Law. Thousands of questions arise because of the Lord's deliberate silence in many areas. However, it should be obvious that, since the Lord Himself chose not to reveal His specific will in those areas, He did not consider it important for us to be precise there either. Therefore, whatever we decide to do about matters He has not revealed cannot ever become *precepts* or *doctrines* to be taught to others as law. However, the mere fact that our opinions cannot be taught *as doctrine* is, in itself, insufficient to condemn our decisions, if we recognize



them for what they are, i.e. human opinions. It is, rather, when we begin to TEACH AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN that we automatically fall under Jesus' condemnation. As pointed out in the special study following this chapter, "The Law of Christ—How to Avoid Becoming a Pharisee," in areas where God has not commanded or prohibited a given thing, He has left us free to have private opinions, so long as these opinions do not nullify His commandments and are not considered as equal to His Words.

One illustration may serve here: Whereas the Lord requires that Christians sing Him their "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" heartily with thankfulness to God (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), He did not specify whether in every case those musical expressions are to be accompanied by any or by many musical instruments. His silence leaves Christians free to decide. However, no Christian is free to decide that his decision must become law for others. Nor may he expect their compliance, except insofar as they share his opinion. All, however, must recognize that any opinion in this area is purely human and can never become *doctrine*, either for or against the musical instrument. Therefore, anyone who commands the use of an instrument, or demands its removal, does so on the basis of the same human logic that got the ancient Jews into the moral bind we see in our text, by exalting to the level of teachable *doctrine* what they themselves decided should be *precepts*. To avoid becoming Pharisees when we learn that some sincere disciples of the Lord are using (or not using) a musical instrument to accompany their corporate singing, we should always investigate whether they *teach as doctrine* what, in the final analysis, can be nothing but the opinionable *precepts of men*. On the other hand, if their choice is not being taught as divine law, but recognized as a simple expression of human freedom, without any pretense to a more sacred origin, so that any subsequent alteration or difference in the use of, or non-use of, these things produce no division or contention in the Church, they are free to make use of them or not as things of a purely relative utility.

Protestant traditionalists are perhaps less explicit in their affirmation that their own distinctive doctrines are divinely inspired, than are the Roman Catholic authorities, but are none the less in perfect harmony with the Jewish traditionalistic approach condemned here by the Lord. (See special notes on the inspiration of Catholic tradition, 15:13.)

## 2. Before the multitudes:

"Real defilement is not external, but spiritual!"

(15:10, 11; Mk. 7:14-17)

15:10 **And he called to him the multitude, and said unto them.** Had this crowd been gathering, but politely ignored during what seemed to be a private conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees? Now, however, He deliberately includes them, as if they, too, had heard the major charge levelled by the Pharisees. Otherwise, this startling declaration (15:11) would seem too much out of context for it to be understood instantly and without further explanation.

Despite the real probability that the "reverend doctors from Jerusalem" would be humiliated by this deliberate escalation, and despite the noticeable embarrassment of the Twelve who felt themselves publically trapped between the official doctrine of the recognized scholars in Judaism and their Master's pronouncements, the Lord Himself cannot further tolerate the substitution of God's truth by whatever means. He must show compassion upon the masses who were led to their spiritual death by these blind, spiritual guides. When the Master turns to the crowds—the non-specialists in Judaism, the multitudes despised by the proud scholars,—this is glorious mercy. The obstinate, unteachable chiefs are bypassed for those who, however weak and unfit in other ways, were far more open and teachable. (See notes on 11:25-30.)

**Hear and understand.** How many of the merely curious and careless would actually ponder His meaning? Here is the acid test of His audience, used in precisely the same manner as in His great Sermon in Parables. (See Mt. 13:9-22 and relative notes.) Man's morality is deeply affected by his own receptivity to truth, because he can decide whether to listen to Jesus or not. By attempting to influence His hearers, He refutes the excuse that sin is somehow necessary under certain circumstances for which the individual is somehow not responsible, because in precisely the same way man can shut the doors of his mind to truth, he can shut them to temptation! So, man is liable for all that comes out of his own heart, because he can decide which way he will permit himself to be influenced, for good or ill. Consequently, every man is the final source of his own character. This is why practical discipleship to Jesus is so vital, because what we let Him teach us affects our attitude toward all else that enters our lives. This urgent invitation to *hear and understand* is rightly addressed, not merely to the scholars, but especially to the "ordinary

people," who must dedicate themselves to study and understand what the Lord means.

Nevertheless, it may be fairly asked to what extent the Lord expected ANY disciple—Apostle or otherwise—to understand and apply His Law-changing, revolutionary declaration about ceremonial purity? (15:11) Since the Levitical system, upon which such distinctions were based, would not be cancelled until His own sacrifice at the cross (Heb. 7:11ff, 26ff; 9:15ff, 24ff; 10:9f; Col. 2:13-15, etc.), did He really expect at least some of them to stop washing themselves after ceremonial defilement, or neglect to eat only kosher foods, and the like? Or, is not this lesson much like that on the new birth of water and the Spirit, presented to Nicodemus? (Cf. Jn. 3:1ff) If so, then, Jesus is enunciating a principle that, however much in advance of its actual promulgation it were stated, would not actually take effect until the Holy Spirit should have come on Pentecost to execute Jesus' will. His teaching given in advance of that moment, then, served to bring His disciples' thinking back to the profounder OT teaching, lest the apparent newness of the revelations to be given later by the Apostles under the guidance of the Spirit be too totally unfamiliar.

Thus, the following statement is Jesus' revelation of how God really regards the dual question of external and spiritual defilement and purity. In this light, then, if the Lord does not expect His people to begin at once to act upon His revelation by their rejecting kosher distinctions, they are at least to begin thinking about it, so that the New Covenant revelations will become the welcome confirmations of these previews.

**15:11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man.** The revolutionary significance of this statement can hardly be overestimated, because it amounts to a practical abrogation of the Levitical distinction between clean and unclean foods. (Mk. 7:19) Whereas the abrogation itself would not take effect until Christ's death removed the entire Law of Moses (cf. Ro. 3:20f, 28; 6:14; 7:1, 4, 6; 8:1-4; 10:4; 2 Co. 3:3, 7, 11, 14 etc.), nevertheless, here in the ministry of Jesus is another clear statement of His intent to rescind that ancient norm. And yet, nothing could be clearer, from a careful reading of the OT Law on defilement, than that the physical contact through touching certain objects or eating certain foods definitely defiled the one who did so. (Lev. 11; see note on cleanness and defilement at Mt. 15:2.) The Law included these rules which are altogether ignored by the NT, for these reasons:

1. Because God was dealing with a nation in its infancy with a view to bringing it to maturity and preparedness for the final, perfect revelations of Christ. (Gal. 3:23—4:7)
2. Because Jehovah was dealing with Jews in a specific historical setting in which they were literally surrounded by idolatry with its abominable regulations and orientation, which would compromise the distinctiveness and moral growth of Israel. (Dt. 7) The purpose of the laws of purity and defilement had no immediate or primary connection with either sanitation or health, although these might certainly be secondary considerations. The primary concern was always: "Consecrate yourselves therefore and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any (thing) . . . you shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine." (Cf. Lv. 11:44f) Any Hebrew who was really listening to Moses could understand that ceremonial cleansings and abstinence from certain foods had value only insofar as these expressed this fundamental concept. Where the heart was holy, even the ceremonies had value, because God commanded them. Alone, however, these rituals were impotent to produce holiness, since the separation unto the Lord of man's heart is the key factor. If the heart belongs to God through man's personal consecration, all his deeds are clean. (Cf. Tit. 1:15)
3. Because God was furnishing the Christian Church with a foundational vocabulary that defined the concept of personal holiness. (Cf. Peter's citation of Lv. 11:44f in 1 Pt. 1:16; see 1 Th. 4:3-7)

The Law (Word of God) temporarily required these regulations until the time when, having accomplished their purpose, they could be replaced by a more permanent Word from God. Who is this Jesus of Nazareth, then, if He, towering above God's Law, dares to change it? Here is implicit evidence of His essential deity as Author of the OT, evidence that is in perfect harmony with His more explicit claims.

Contrary to the view of some, this passage does not represent a psychological or religious revolution in terms of what God reveals about the things that really affect human existence, because God, both in the Law and through the Prophets, was constantly hammering on the eternal importance of the conditions of man's heart. In fact, Jesus' declaration is but the summation of hundreds of OT sermons which would actually prepare the Hebrew mind to accept just such a statement as that of Jesus here. (Cf. Psa. 5:9; 50; 51; 58:2; 78:36f; Isa. 1:10-20; Jer. 2:22; 4:14; 6:19f; 7:21-26; 11:15; 13:27; 14:9-12; 33:8) How many great prophets and godly men before Jesus had

lamented and condemned Israel's hypocritical ceremonialism because the nation had no vital confidence in God, no real concern to be holy! Remember the great religious reforms of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 29-32) and Josiah (2 Chr. 34, 35) and the prophetic preaching like that of Micah (3:11; 6:4-6) or Malachi. (Cf. Am 4:4f; 5:21-24; Joel 2:12-14; Ezek. 14:11; 20:7, 26; 22:24; 23:13, 17, 30; 24:9-14; 33:30-33; 36:17, 20, 24-27)

**15:11 Not that which entereth into the mouth defileth the man; but that which proceedeth out of the mouth, this defileth the man.** This is but one sentence, one pithy, memorable proverb, directed to the people, the meaning of which Jesus will later explain to the disciples. (See on vv. 18-20.) Is this verse the substance of an entire message delivered by Jesus at this point? This might be admitted, because it would seem less likely that He would have drawn the crowds into His conversation with the Pharisees just to hear this single sentence. Yet, He could have intentionally thrown this mysterious maxim into the crowd like a live hand grenade, to stir them to reflect on its meaning, question Him further and thus deepen their discipleship as well as their understanding. (See on 13:10; 15:12.) The fact that the Twelve later ask about it proves not only their personal loyalty but also that He had not made it clear to them in the presence of the multitudes.

The Apostle to the Gentiles will develop this concept in the concise Christian axiom: "The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." (Ro. 14:17) By affirming that real purity or defilement is not merely external, but of the heart, the Lord established a principle so fundamental in its application that it not only expressed the radical character and grandeur of Christian freedom as this contrasts with Mosaic restrictions, but it also warns that the standard by which men will be judged is not merely by their outward deeds but by the character of their heart.

### 3. Before the disciples, privately (15:12-20; Mk. 7:17-23)

"When He entered into a house away from the crowd, His disciples questioned Him." (Mk. 7:17) This decisive move permitted the concerned to draw Him out and receive the help His surprising declaration

made necessary.

15:12 **Then came the disciples, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, when they heard this saying?** The fact that they are worried enough to warn Jesus about possible evil consequences of His position shows that these are real men with real confusions. They are not story-book characters whose bad side should be glossed over. This is a mark of authenticity. Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 214) wonders whether the disciples themselves might not also be scandalized by Jesus' extreme statements. After all, if they had begun to see that Jesus, in theory at least, is removing the proper, Levitical boundaries between clean and unclean meats, even if on any other ground they had no quarrel with Jesus because of the solid character of their trust in His divine credentials that proved His right to speak for God, yet here He dares lay hands upon already well-authenticated revelation from God. So, even though the Pharisees had attacked the disciples personally, still, from the point of view of what the unquestionable Law of God had taught, they surprisingly found themselves on the defensive against Jesus who now seemed to negate a significant part of God's Word. From this standpoint, they found themselves effectively thrown onto the same side with the Pharisees! Their worry is twofold:

1. The question of authority: "In the face of this open rejection and refutation of the Pharisees' position with its consequent affront to these men of light and learning, as well as the religious power of the day, do you adhere to your position?" Here is the fundamental question: who really represents God here? The Pharisees and their traditional theologians who, without any demonstrable evidence of divine authority for nullifying God's explicit orders by their interpretations, or Jesus of Nazareth "a man attested to you by God by many mighty works and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know"? (Cf. Ac. 2:22) How much weight should be given to His credentials, if His message seems to detract from the authority of well-attested revelations in Leviticus? (Cf. Dt. 13:1-5; Isa. 8:20) Humanly speaking, their position is not an easy one.
2. The question of favorably religio-political support: "These are men of considerable power and influence in the nation. Can you successfully wage a significant campaign for religious reform in Israel without their patronage and influence? Must you, through lack of sufficient foresight and tact, lose the all-essential support

of backers like these?" The disciples' view of the Kingdom is measurably mistaken if they believe that the Kingdom's interests can be rightly served by men who habitually nullify the Law of the King, and whose best service to the King is dictated by their own tastes, customs and rules!

Having seen Jesus deliberately break with the popular nationalistic principles of the Zealots' cause (see on 14:22), the disciples probably fear that to enrage these influential scholars would precipitate a tragic end to His program.

**The Pharisees were offended.** Indeed, they had every reason to be shocked and angered, because He dared teach the people doctrine that put in doubt the traditional basis of their customs by exposing revered rabbinical opinions as absurd and ungodly. He discredited their pretended scholarship and popular authority. If He is right, their entire theory of piety is wrong. The rightness of His opposition is in exact proportion to the arrogance of their self-assertion, self-worship and self-complacency. But here is a proper test-case of scandal. (See on Mt. 11:6.) Jesus **MUST** teach the truth and do His duty. If anyone is scandalized by His actions, it is the fault of that individual, but not of him who, in obedience to truth, does his duty. Jesus' justification which follows, explains His attitude toward those theologians.

15:13 **But he answered and said, Every plant which my heavenly Father planteth not, shall be rooted up.** Two views of the *plant* are possible: (1) traditions; (2) traditionalists.

1. If Jesus means the figure of the *plant not planted* by God, to represent people who nullify God's Word in their teaching and/or practice, then He may be referring to a fact which would actually occur when these very false teachers, who had seemed so formidable to the Apostles, would one day be removed from their positions of influence and authority. In this light, the Lord is warning the Apostles that "the reverend gentlemen from Jerusalem," because they rejected God's truth, would one day be rudely uprooted from their glorious position, whereas, if the Apostles themselves shall have truly honored God's will, would remain in God's field.
2. If, on the other hand, Jesus means to refer to the human traditions, then He is saying that since human tradition does not possess God's authority, it must be eradicated, whereas His own teaching will stand that test. (Cf. Jer. 23, esp. vv. 28, 29) Here Jesus underscores the important distinction between one tradition

and another: who started it? Who or what is its ORIGIN? If God planted it, it will endure. If, on the other hand, it can claim no more than human authority, it is destined to be removed from consideration and must be evaluated from that standpoint. Its value is decided on the basis of origins.

In practice, it is unimportant which of these interpretations is the better, because beliefs can never really be distinguished from those who teach them, because what they believe makes them what they are. People are to be identified with, and judged by, the doctrines they say they believe in. (Remember what Jesus said about the interrelation of heart and doctrine in Mt. 13. See notes on 13:38b, c.) Jesus had already taught that not all the plants growing in the Kingdom are of His sowing, hence, not all please Him. (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43; cf. 1 Th. 2:15)

Is it urgent here to decide WHO would do the uprooting? Is it God? Jesus? the apostles? Time? In our text Jesus Himself furnishes the sickles and shovels whereby the Apostles and Christians anywhere might *root up* ALL teaching that does not square with God's Word, is done without divine authority or approval, by comparing it with the Bible, by recognizing the tendency of human opinions to nullify some Word from God. Further, by implication, Jesus defends His duty to attack and root out what is false, corrupting and positively dangerous for the growth of *what my heavenly Father planted*.

In fact, implicit in Jesus' words is the suggestion that there is at least one kind of plant which the heavenly Father DID plant, that shall never be rooted up. Is it not the Kingdom with its doctrine and its believers? It is to be a Kingdom in which Mosaic legislation about impurity of any sort other than moral is to have no part. In contrast to rabbinic notions of the importance of their own hoary traditions, it is to be a Kingdom in which the Father's Word is to be the only standard. In contrast to scribal contempt for publicans and sinners, Samaritans, Gentiles and women, it is to be a Kingdom that embraces all who bow before the King and joyfully do anything He says. Naturally, as Maurice (*PHC*, Vol. XXII, 382) has it,

The most natural and necessary antagonists of it were the sects; that Sadducees and Pharisees hated it equally; that they saw in it the destruction of the sect-principle. . . . There is a plant in your heart and mine which our heavenly Father has not planted, and which must be rooted out. It is that same plant of self-seeking, of



opinionativeness, of party-spirit, which has shed its poison over the church and over the world.

### NOTES ON CATHOLIC TRADITIONS

Study the "new" Catholicism as this denomination is revealed in her *Documents of the Second Vatican Council*. Following is my translation from Italian of excerpts from the document *Dei Verbum*, Chapter II: "On the Transmission of the Divine Revelation." Compare these assertions with Judaism's attitude toward tradition and traditional authority to teach God's Word.

. . . The Apostles, so that the Gospel might always be preserved complete and alive in the Church, then left the Bishops as their successors, entrusting to them their own personal position as teachers (*suum ipsorum locum magisterii*). This Sacred Tradition, therefore, and the Sacred Scriptures of both testaments are as one mirror in which the Church, pilgrim on earth, contemplates God . . . Meanwhile, the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, had to be preserved by continuous succession until the end of time. Therefore, the Apostles, committing that which they themselves had received, admonish the faithful to hold to the traditions which they had received either by word of mouth or by letter (cf. 2 Thess. 2:15), and to contend for that faith which had been once for all delivered to them (cf. Jude 3) . . .

This Tradition of apostolic origin progresses (*proficit*) in the Church with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (*sub assistentia Spiritus Sancti*): in fact the comprehension grows both of the things as well as of the words handed down, both by means of the meditation and study of the believers who meditate upon them in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2:19 and 51), and by means of the experience that derives from a deeper understanding of spiritual things, as well as by the preaching of those who, along with the episcopal succession, received a certain charisma of truth (*ex paeconio eorum qui cum episcopatus successione charisma veritatis certum acceperunt*). The Church, that is, in the course of the centuries, incessantly tends toward the fulness of the divine truth, until the words of God be brought to (or come to) perfection (*donec in ipsa consummentur verba Dei*).

The assertions of the Holy Fathers attest the life-giving presence of this Tradition, the riches of which are transfused into the practice and life of the Church that believes and that prays. It is the same Tradition that causes the Church to know the entire canon of the Sacred Books, and, in her, causes to understand more profoundly and animates the Sacred Letters themselves (*et indesinenter actuosae reddentur*); thus, God who spoke in the past, does not cease to speak with the Bride of His Beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit, by means of whose voice the living voice of the Gospel resounds in the Church, by whose means (it resounds) in the world, leads the believers to all the truth and causes the word of Christ to dwell in them in all its richness (cf. Col. 3:16).

The Sacred Tradition therefore and the Holy Scriptures are bound closely together and are communicating between them. Since both spring from the same divine origin, they form, in a certain sense, one thing and tend toward the same goal. In fact, the Sacred Scripture is the word of God, because written by the inspiration of the Spirit of God; the word of God, entrusted by Christ and by the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, is entirely transmitted by the Sacred Tradition to their successors, so that these, illuminated by the Spirit of truth (*prae lucente Spiritu veritatis*), might preserve it faithfully by their preaching, expound and publish it; and thus it is that the Church bases its certainty about all the things revealed, not upon the Scripture alone (*non per solam Sacram Scripturam hauriat*). Therefore the one and the other must be considered worthy of veneration with equal pious affection and reverence (*Quapropter utraque pari pietatis affectu ac reverentia suscipienda et veneranda est*).

The Sacred Tradition and the Sacred Scripture constitute one sacred deposit of the Word of God entrusted to the Church . . .

The Office of interpreting authentically the word of God, written or handed down (*verbum Dei scriptum vel traditum*) is entrusted only to the living Magisterium (i.e. Teaching Authority) of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This Teaching Authority (Magisterium), however, is not superior to the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed down, since, by divine mandate and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (*ex divino mandato et Spiritu Sancto assistente*), it piously heeds, holily guards and faithfully expounds that word; and from this one deposit of the faith draws forth all that it proposes to believe as revealed by God.



Because the verb-form is second plural, we must reject with reluctance the construction, suggested by A.B. Bruce (*Training*, 84), whereby these words are seen as the disciples' advice to Jesus: "Let them alone, Jesus!" Otherwise, the words bounced back to the disciples would have probably been expressed in the second person singular verb-form. We must understand the plural as really addressed to the disciples.

Jesus' meaning, based upon the meaning-potential of this verb, might be:

1. *Divorce* them from your thinking. Their doctrine is not permanent, because it is not God's.
2. *Pardon* them their offense at the truth I teach. They are wrongly scandalized, but I am not backing down. From this standpoint, He not only places Himself above the scribes, i.e. in a position to overlook their offense; He actually requires that the disciples rise to the position where they can remit or cancel, as far as their own feelings are concerned, this false scandal of the rabbis. Jesus Himself certainly did not hold this particular attack against the Pharisees, because He continued vigorously to attempt to convince them, even if this meant exposing their hypocrisy and opposing their doctrine. The Apostles would later be engaged in public debate with Judaizers clear until the fall of Jerusalem.
3. *Give up* on the Pharisees, because they are incorrigible. Stop worrying about what they think, because there comes a time when you must "shake the dust off your feet against them" and abandon them to their wilful blindness and self-chosen fate.
4. *Tolerate* the Pharisees as individuals, because we are dealing with the evils of their system, not attacking them personally. By temporarily tolerating them, we may actually grant them the mercy to reflect and repent, if some of them will. (Cf. 13:30!) *Tolerate* them until their blindness reaches its culmination and they are toppled into destruction along with all who agree with them.

Does it matter which of these suggestions is correct? In all of them runs Jesus' sound advice: "Do not be overly excited about their approval or unfavorable opinion of my teaching or program, for they shall fall. God guarantees their condemnation, regardless of their apparently powerful influence and their presently great authority. Above all, do not fear them!" (Cf. Lk. 12:1-12; Mt. 10:16ff, 26-33) The Pharisees' spiritual condition, with its self-willed blindness and

stubborn hypocrisy, its deliberate adherence to human traditions rather than love for God and His revelations, fully justifies His (and, consequently, their) abandoning them to their just condemnation.

**They are blind guides.** Jesus never once denied that these Pharisees are *guides*, furnished with scholarship, credentials and an impressive following. What is really comforting to the disciples is His confident assertion that they, who claim the exclusive vision of the truth and the unique right to lead Israel in her worship and service to God, are really *blind*. (See notes on 13:13-17.) *Blind*, in this case, means biased, prejudiced so as to be unable to grasp truth, however evident it might be. Truth, according to these imperturbable bigots, is not to be found outside their vain opinions. This assertion of Jesus comforts the disciples, because they begin to see that the formidable specter presented by these religious scholars did not represent ultimate reality, because **THEIR EYES, and those of their followers however numerous, WERE CLOSED TO IT.** The real issue is always whether Jesus' disciples really believe that Jesus is the God-sent Guide who can see to lead His people safely back to God.

*Blind guides:* if their boast of their knowledge of the Law qualified them to be Rabbis, "a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness" (Ro. 2:17-24), what a shock to hear them described as the tragic perversion of their high calling! Worse still was their total unconsciousness of their self-chosen blindness, confounded by their pretense to be able to see. (Cf. Jn. 9:40f) What blindness to be unable to discern the futility of zeal and diligence in activities intended to justify oneself before God but which were totally uncalled for by God! They were *blind guides*, because they knew perfectly well what God said in the Law, but still thought they had a right to have their own way. ("God commanded . . . But you say . . ." vv. 4, 5) The Apostles had not yet understood that all that even great, learned authorities affirm with unhesitating confidence must be compared with God's message, and should their notions be found inconsistent with His, they may be safely discarded without fear of losing something of value or permanence. (Cf. Ac. 4:19f)

**And if the blind guide the blind, both shall fall into a pit.** The crushing irony here is that these very *blind guides* are themselves *the blind* followers of those ancient elders whose traditions they held in such reverential honor, because they followed them blindly, unconcerned about how far from the way of truth, righteousness and true godliness those completely human ordinances would lead them.

**Both shall fall into a pit.** Blind followers ARE responsible for what

they believe. However much they may be influenced by false leaders, they are lost. Thus, false religious teaching or mistaken religious leaders actually take sincere followers along with them to their destruction. (Study notes on 7:13-24, 28.) If a man believes himself to be in need of leadership but freely and deliberately chooses as leader another man who himself needs correction, he deserves the tragedy that will be his. (Jer. 14:14-16; 20:6; 28:15f; Isa. 9:16; Ezek. 14:9-11) McGarvey (Matthew-Mark, 136) rightly counsels:

He should choose a leader who can see, and as there is no leader who can see all the way that we have to travel except Jesus, let us take his word as our only guide, going only as it leads us.

Despite our felt need for human teachers to help us along toward truth (cf. Ac. 8:31; 1 Co. 4:15; Eph. 4:11), we should follow no man, except as he follows Christ. (1 Co. 11:1; 4:16)

15:15 **And Peter answered and said unto him, Declare unto us the parable.** Evidently, Peter is the spokesman for the disciples who had become uneasy about Jesus' indifference toward the violent reaction of the religious leaders. In fact, the sharp rebuke Jesus administers is in the plural ("ye"), hence, addressed to the group Peter represents. (15:16)

What expression of Jesus' seemed so obscure to Peter that he described it as *the parable*? Whereas in Matthew there are two germ parables in the context, i.e. that of the rooted up plants (v. 13) and that of the blind guides (v. 14), Mark's version omits these two by passing directly from the public statement about internal defilement to the explanation of this *parable*. (Mk. 7:14-17) So Peter is requesting clearer information about this enigmatic public statement. (Mt. 15:11 = Mk. 7:15)

NOTE: Here is further evidence that *parable* in NT language, does not always refer necessarily to a one-point illustration, as required by modern rhetoric. The *parable* referred to by Peter is: "Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man." (v. 11) The only way to consider this a one-point illustration is to suppose either that Jesus actually said more, which is, of course, possible, or that Peter sees this sentence as picturing an incomplete story teaching a moral about a man who ate some food that did not defile him. Then there was that unclear part about what came out of his mouth that defiled him. It is better, however, to see *parable* in

Peter's usage here as meaning: "a terse, ingeniously expressed thought, whose meaning is partially hidden by its brevity and partly by its form and content." What Peter does not understand—for whatever reason—he calls a *parable* (*parabolén*).

Nevertheless, in the declaration referred to (v. 11), there is a feature that is common to parables: real truth is expressed by literal symbols, invisible ideas are symbolized by visible images. In this case moral defilement of the heart is symbolized by something coming out of one's mouth. Peter's question is not totally groundless, because, without further explanation or previous insight, it would not be clear what it is that comes out of a man's mouth, when it was food that went in.

**15:16 And he said, Are ye also even yet without understanding?** If Jesus' rebuke seems exaggerated by contrast to a simple request for information of what was unclear, it must be measured against the much private information and exceptional opportunity that had already been given these very close disciples. (Cf. 15:12) They are not simply part of "the people" (Mt. 15:10; Mk. 7:14, 17) whom Jesus often left on the outer fringe so long as they chose not to become closer disciples. (Cf. Mt. 13:10-17) There is an emphatic sting in each of the words: *Are you also — even yet — without understanding?* because of the implied contrast with all others. Despite the pretended authority of the Jerusalem scholars, these refused to learn from Jesus, so remained *without understanding*, and rightly so. The crowds who asked no questions and wanted no answers were *also without understanding*. But what justification could the Apostles muster for their inability to see the far-reaching implications of His great revolutionary declaration? Even if their main difficulty is their inability to admit that this basic element of Mosaic legislation can be eliminated once the fundamental purpose for its original enactment had been fulfilled, what excuse could cover their failure to admit Jesus to be the Lawgiver Himself and fully empowered to change, correct or even abolish His own Law? Or should they fail to hold so exalted an estimate of their Master, they are also *without understanding* of even the basic concepts taught both in the Law and prophets which God intended all Israel to understand. (See on 15:10f.) Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 216) is right to admonish: "Christ expects from us some proportion of knowledge, and grace, and wisdom, according to the time and means we have had. See Jn. 14:9; Heb. 5:12; 2 Ti. 3:7f."

**15:17 Perceive ye not, that whatsoever goeth into the mouth passeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught?** The Lord describes here the normal functioning of the alimentary canal: common food passes from one part of the digestive system to the other and what cannot be assimilated is eliminated. Because He is speaking generally, those substances that are positively harmful to the body are not considered here. However, normal food is used in the body for its strength, but this process does not defile the body, because the moral state of a man is not really based upon the material or the mechanical. That is, purely physical processes, which have no relation to the will, the intellect, the emotions, or the conscience, can never really pollute or profane the heart. There is no proper connection, no real affinity between material food *per se* and the soul.

It is because of this objective lack of affinity, therefore, that Jesus can affirm that food, any food, is objectively "clean, pure." The Levitical system was, thus, an arbitrary law that forbade the eating of certain foods so that the Israelites might learn holiness through obedience to these arbitrary laws. The defilement, involved in eating foods declared unclean, lay not in the objective impurity of those foods, but in a Hebrew's disregarding God's law by requesting and justifying his eating of that food. Lenski (*Matthew*, 589, 592) is right to say that "forbidden meats could be eaten only by a Jew who was set on disobeying God's Levitical law," but he draws a wrong conclusion therefrom when he denies that Jesus intended "no abrogation of the Levitical laws concerning meats." In fact, when Jesus declares the objective purity of ALL foods (Mk. 7:19), He says the opposite of the food laws which said "SOME meats are impure." So He is actually undermining any consideration of the Levitical distinctions as absolute. By going back of the subjective impurity of certain foods to the objective purity of all foods, Jesus is going back of the Levitical rules that established that subjective impurity, and effectively cancels the distinctions they created. But, by so doing, He rises above the Levitical system and dares say something different than it had said. Mark (7:19) does not want his readers to miss that connection, but Matthew, sensitive to the biases of his readership, does not want to close their mind to the more important truth he wants to get across. He knows that if they accept Jesus as Lord, Messiah and revealer of God, they will, in time, see that He can erase Levitical rules too. (Cf. Ac. 10:10-16; 11:9)

Jesus' declaration expresses His fundamental confidence in the basic goodness of God's creation, as over against an ascetic tendency



to suspect certain aspects of God's creation as intrinsically contaminating or profaning. (Cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-5; Gen. 1:31; 9:3; Ro. 14:2, 6; 1 Co. 10:25-30; Ac. 10:28)

True enough, "an inordinate appetite, intemperance, and excess in eating; come out of the heart, and are defiling." (M. Henry, Vol. V, 216) Further, while it is true that foods do have their effect on the body and cannot be regarded as having absolutely no effect, Jesus, however, is discussing what will defile man's soul, not discussing health or simple sanitation. Even if the precise food laws affected by Jesus' declaration might yet be followed as a question of "health and hygiene and common sense and medical wisdom" (Barclay, *Matthew*, II, 131), after they were abrogated at the cross, they could never remain in vigor as a question of conscience to disturb the soul.

This basic character of Judaism, as opposed to true, OT religion, whereby the former pitted ritual purity against ethical purity at the expense of the latter and seen in the tendency to multiply regulations for external self-abasement, is all too easily reproduced in the Church. (Study 1 Ti. 4:1-5; Col. 2:8-23.) Paul's whole argument in Col. 2, 3 is that man cannot achieve life with a holy God by strict adherence to human regulations, precepts and doctrines which, however wisely they appear to promote rigor of devotion, self-abasement and severity to the body, have no value in dealing with the root cause of fleshly indulgence. This must come from a new mind-set.

**15:18 But the things which proceed out of the mouth come forth out of the heart; and they defile the man.** This is probably the profoundest declaration on mind-pollution. Nothing pours out of the mind through one's speech but what was first put there. The great issue, then, is what is getting into a man's mind? This is why propaganda in all its forms, both good and bad, is a life-changing activity, since man's conduct is deeply affected by whatever is in his mind. (Cf. Staton, *The Perfect Balance*, 79f)

What does this say about the Pharisees' failure to let the Word of God so completely permeate their thinking that they were able to miss seeing their flagrant violation of God's holy commandment? Where had they failed to teach the proper concern for one's aged, needy parents? They had failed to keep ALL of God's message in mind, both with its emphasis on parental care, as well as its emphasis on giving to God what had been promised. These theological bunglers failed to maintain that nice balance which God had placed in tension. Consequently, they concentrated on only a portion of the truth, and

this imbalance produced the travesty of truth that Jesus exposes here. He attacks it because He is sure that half-truth cannot make a man whole, and the resulting self-deception, ignorance and conceit is the fatal source of sin in all its expressions. (Study Psa. 119:9, 11, 44f, 104, 130, 165; Col. 3:16; Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19.) The Pharisees were so terribly wrong, because they had filled man's vision of God with a dedication to ceremonials, externals and details, rather than with the knowledge of God, mercy, justice and faithfulness. (Hos. 6:6; Mt. 23:23; Phil. 4:8)

**The things which proceed out of the mouth** means "words," of course, and these really *defile the man*. Man's thoughts and intentions shape them into the creatures they are before they are ever expressed verbally. In fact, it is not essential that one's plans ever be vocalized for them to pollute his heart and life. (Cf. Mt. 5:22, 28) Whereas by the very nature of food, whatever does not assimilate into the body is eliminated, the nature of sinful words and attitudes produces, unfortunately, quite another result, because whatever is produced in the soul (*psychè*) influences the character and blights every human expression. This finds confirmation on the positive side of human experience, because Jesus states it as a general rule that a "good man out of his good treasure brings forth good." (Mt. 12:33-37) Good also begins in the mind. (Phil. 4:8; cf. Mt. 7:17f; Lk. 6:43-45) *The heart* is all that, taken together, composes the entire man: his desires, his conscience, his will, his intellect, his memory, his habits, his temperament. *They defile the man*: the only defilement worth discussing is that of an evil, unregenerate mind, because this is the true source of those thoughts, words and deeds that offend against God's Law. (Cf. Jas. 1:13-15; Jer. 17:9; see on 15:19.)

Matthew Henry (Vol. V, 214) astutely notices that "it is not the disciples that defile themselves with what they eat, but the Pharisees that defile themselves with what they speak spitefully and censoriously of them." It is so easy to defile ourselves by transgressing God's Law against censoriousness, while we criticize others for their transgressions of His Law. There are no neutral words that do not count: they must positively bless others or they defile the person who says them. (Col. 3:16; 4:6; Eph. 4:29; 5:4; 1 Pt. 3:15, 16; Jas. 3:10)

15:19 **For**: the principle stated in v. 18 is now to be explained and amplified. **Out of the heart come forth evil thoughts**: this does not state a law of permanent depravity that excludes the possibility of any good as coming from the heart as such, because the Lord Himself

also affirmed the latter. He means here that evil thoughts and all their effects come from the heart, not from some missed ceremony or bungled ritual. Since a wicked heart is the poison fountain whence this pollution pours, if His hearers desire to alter the character of what comes from their hearts, they must have a **NEW HEART!** Jesus' statement only becomes an unchangeable law for those who refuse to change the character of their entire being by total conversion to Christ. (Cf. Heb. 3:12f)

**Evil thoughts** are the father of the deeds that make up this defiling catalog. In fact, were these never the subject of man's daydreams nor the object of his desires, they could never surface as deeds, because they would have died abortively.

NOTE: Mark introduces only "evil thoughts" with definite articles ("the thoughts, i.e. the evil ones") whereas he seems to place all the other sins in apposition to them, hence without articles, as if the latter are to be considered as the natural expression "evil thoughts," which is, of course, what Jesus affirmed explicitly.

Since the sins listed begin with, and are the expression of *evil thoughts*, we must beware of "an itching interest" in them, lest our own steadfastness be compromised by our own apparent conscientiousness which may be nothing but a lusty curiosity that loves to dwell on the details. (Eph. 5:12 in context) For this reason we must be set straight by Jesus on these subjects, that we might have His power for our self-defense against them.

In order to include Mark's additions, Matthew's list has been reorganized to capture certain groupings that reveal how the acts externalize the *evil thoughts*:

1. **HATEFUL THOUGHTS.** *Murder* is but the external manifestation of hate latent in the heart. (See notes on 5:21f; cf. Jas. 4:1f; Psa. 55:21; 1 Jn. 3:15.) An *evil eye* (*ofthalmôs ponerôs*) means that jealous envy that broods hate, because unable or unwilling to rejoice in the good fortune of another and wishing to deprive him of it.
2. **SENSUAL THOUGHTS.** *Adultery* (*moicheîai*) differs from *fornication* (*porneîai*) in that the former refers in this context to extramarital sexual relations, while the latter refers to premarital relations, but both are natural products of a lusty heart. (See notes on 5:27-32.) Mark (7:22) adds "licentiousness" (*asêlgeia*) whose

range of meaning includes: "debauchery, sensuality, especially of sexual excesses" (Arndt-Gingrich, 114) as well as "dissoluteness, insolence, shamelessness, coarseness, arrogance" (Rocci, 277). See 2 Pt. 2:14a.

3. DISCONTENTED THOUGHTS. *Theft* (*klopai*) is born of a desire to possess something without which it cannot rest content until it is taken. Mark (7:22) adds "coveting" (*pleonexiai*), which is the insatiable greed that leads to *theft*, and many other soul-piercing evils as well. (Cf. 1 Ti. 6:6-10) There are degrees of greed in everyone, that are in direct proportion to the degree we content ourselves with what God provides. (Heb. 13:5f) Greed expresses the real idolatry in the heart. (Col. 3:5) The whole spirit of "covetousness" defiles, because people do not want to be satisfied to live without all the products promoted by industry. They must "have more" (*pleon + exia*), even if someone else must pay the bills.
4. UNCHARITABLE THOUGHTS. *False witness* (*pseudomartyriai*) may be prompted by inner fear to represent openly what is known to be otherwise than is declared, as well as by the hate that gives testimony that deliberately damages an innocent person. Mark (7:22) notes also "deceit" (*dòlos*) which points to that cunning treachery and stealth by which one intentionally deceives others. (See 2 Pt. 2:14; Psa. 62:10.)
5. BLASPHEMOUS THOUGHTS. *Slander* (*blasfemiai*) is a degrading, derogating kind of speech often produced by maliciousness or bitterness, whether directed at God or man. (cf. Jas. 3:9) At its heart is pride and censoring criticism. (See on 7:1-5.) It engenders and is also produced by false witness to which it is necessarily kin.
6. PERVERSE THOUGHTS. "Wickednesses" (Mark 7:22 *poneriai*) in the "plural speaks of various kinds of evil-mindedness and individual expressions of it, malicious acts" (Arndt-Gingrich, 697); "perversity" (Rocci, 1539)
7. VAIN THOUGHTS. "Pride" (Mk. 7:22, *hyperefania*) refers to haughtiness and arrogance (Arndt-Gingrich, 849) which includes insolence, contempt and scorn (Rocci, 1895). Pride is always wrong when it is pride in man, his position, his accomplishments—anything but the living God. (Cf. 1 Co. 1:31)
8. THOUGHTLESS THOUGHTS. "Foolishness" (Mk. 7:22, *afrosùne*) speaks of a lack of moral and intellectual sense that borders on insanity, but is caused by indifference and imprudence. (Rocci,

326) Moral recklessness is not merely foolish; it is sin. (Prov. 24:9)

From the above it is evident that, whereas human law can judge a man on the basis of what he actually does, never on the basis of his attitude except as this expresses itself in deeds, God's judgment tests everything by man's motives or intentions before they ever lead him to act or speak as he does.

15:20 **These defile the man**, says Jesus. God is no ogre who forbids something conducive to man's well-being and best interest, when He demands moral purity. He knows that this contributes to what is right for man, his health and strength. Therefore, that lack of self-discipline which refuses to remove these causes of real defilement invites not only self-pollution, but, finally, self-destruction. This is why we must learn to hate sin and its defilement of our conscience, its pollution of our dearest relationships, its vitiation of our highest motives. The trouble with the Pharisees was that they did not hate sin. They only hated to see any of their opinions discounted. Since their conscience had been so long accustomed to insist upon ceremonies of human origin and to being intransigent sticklers for something that never really mattered at all, their mind was impossible to arouse by any discussion of real defilement. But are we moderns personally concerned about being defiled in the sight of a holy God? Do we really glorify God for His power to cleanse us? (Cf. Ps. 51)

Merely because the NT repealed and removed the OT legislation on defilement and cleansing, it did not thereby make everything right and innocent without qualification. Study the following texts: Ro. 14:14, 20 and Tit. 1:15 in harmony with Jas. 3:6; 4:8; 1 Co. 3:17; 8:7; Heb. 12:15; Ro. 1:24; 6:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3, 5; Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5; 1 Th. 2:3; 4:7; 2 Co. 7:1; 12:21; 2 Pt. 1:4; 2:10. Again, since sin *defiles the man*, real cleansing must be able to remove this real defilement. (Study Ac. 8:22; 15:9; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 2:14; 3:5; Heb. 9:13f; 10:14, 22; 1 Pt. 1:2, 22; 3:21; 1 Jn. 1:5-9.) The OT legislation merely furnished us the vocabulary and strengthened our moral muscles to walk and talk with God in perfect sanctity of flesh and spirit. The concept of purity and pollution taught us in the OT Law has not been forgotten, but elevated, strengthened and made far more imperative. The details whereby the concept is to be practiced differ, because we are not under the Mosaic Levitical system, but the concept of personal holiness is as fully obligatory as it is fully Christian.

J. Parker (*PHC*, Vol. XXII, 383) summarizes the proper application of this section to Christian practice:

So long as we think we can wash the evil off our hands in any one of the world's rivers, we do not feel our want of a gospel. That want is felt only in proportion to our conviction that sin is in our very souls, that it penetrates every fibre, and poisons every spring and energy of our being.

This is why this section is so fundamental: modern Christians may not observe a hand-washing tradition whereby they hope to justify themselves before God and be able to live among men, but whatever they invent or accept as handed down to them from "the fathers" is totally inadequate to make them all God wants them to be. It may be positively damaging in that it nullifies what God required, and, as a religious exercise, it threatens to blind their mind to what really separates man from God and destroys human communion.

We would entirely miss the real meaning of this passage if we but substituted other human rules whereby we would avoid becoming Pharisees, but failed to do the one thing necessary for real, lasting cleansing from all defilement of flesh and spirit. Morgan (*Matthew*, 197) ponders:

Is our religion a thing of the heart, a communion between our inner life and God, a force that drives us to the watch-tower in the morning to catch a gleam of the glory of the pathway of His feet, a passion that sends us back to Him with shame and disgust when we have sinned? That is the true religion. If Jesus in all the virtue of His life and love sits sentinel in our heart, we shall guard our lips, and be careful as to what we eat or drink . . .

We shall be careful to do anything He asks, without artful dodging our duty by sham regulations and great zeal for meaningless rituals invented to measure our piety.

**But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.** Merely because Jesus placed hand-washing as a religious ritual in the category of things indifferent is no excuse for "hippy Christians" as if what is important is what people do, not what they look or smell like. In no sense did He approve of indifference to the use and abuse of food and drink, or indifference toward personal cleanliness and filth. Rather, His principle means that all these matters are fully expressions of our tastes, inclinations, desires, choices and will—in short, the character of our heart. The very reasons why some choose to be

filthy in dress or hygiene may be very defiling because these involve the sins of lack of concern for the conscience and feelings of others, the refusal properly to reflect the image of God in one's own person, and perhaps other sins as well.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the worship of God. What is worship? What kind is acceptable or unacceptable to God? How did Old Testament worship differ from New Testament worship? What are the essential elements of worship?
2. Describe briefly the Jewish traditions concerning purification. Include Mark's brief summary. What was the original foundation of these ideas? Why did Jesus violate them? Was there any difference between Jesus' teachings on defilement and the God-given teaching in the OT? How much and why?
3. What was the OT teaching concerning defilement and purification? Was ceremonial defilement a serious matter in the OT? What was the usual method for obtaining cleansing from defilement under the OT Law?
4. Why and how did Jesus violate the traditional rules of the elders? Who were these elders?
5. What did Jesus say was wrong with the Jewish traditions?
6. What are traditions? Are there some that are good to keep? If so, which? If not, why are there none which are good?
7. Where did the Pharisees and scribes come from who place this critical question before Jesus? What is significant about their presence in Galilee at this time? What is significant about their attack now?
8. Outline chronologically the events that occurred during this general period from the Sermon on the Mount up to and including the clash with the Pharisees over traditions. Where did this latter occur?
9. What does the word "Corban" mean and how was it used by the Jews?
10. How did Jesus offend the Pharisees? What does the word "offend" mean?
11. List the statements or facts in this section that reveal the unique, supernatural identity of Jesus.
12. Whom did Jesus call "blind guides"? What does Jesus mean

by telling His disciples to "let them alone"? Was He letting them alone?

13. What did Jesus mean by the parable about blind followers of blind guides?
14. Summarize the total answer Jesus gave to the question of the Pharisees: "Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders?"
15. What did Jesus say really pollutes, or defiles, a man? What is the real source of all wickedness? List the things which Jesus named that actually defile a man and give a clear, brief definition of each.
16. What other NT passages discuss cleanness, pollution, purity and filth? Are there any things that are now tabù in Christianity?
17. Make a list of American tabùs that have found their way into American Christianity, but have no necessary origin in the religion of Jesus. This requires more insight than most of us think or have, but give it a try. But once you have finished making the list, realize that this is but a modern, American version of "the traditions of the elders."
18. What is the point of Jesus' statement about plants that God did not plant?
19. What method of cleansing is available to us, or is there anything we can or must do to be cleansed of our defilement?
20. What is the significance of Mark's statement (7:19) about Jesus' "making all meats clean"?
21. Describe pure, undefiled religion.
22. What opinion did the Pharisees have of Jesus to attack Him as often as they dared? Why did they feel this way?

### HOW TO AVOID BECOMING A PHARISEE

Who would WANT to be a Pharisee after all Jesus had to say about them? Ironically, however, for all our abhorrence of their mentality, we may well find ourselves entrapped by inattention to what made the Pharisee what he was. What element(s) stand out; what factors best describe the hideous distortion of true religion that we should identify with the Pharisean mentality? Is it hypocrisy? Superficiality? Pride? Self-worship? Punctiliousness? Proselyting? Self-righteousness? But are not all of these and more but indications of a fault



far deeper and more essential, a fault so basic that facilitates all the others? That fault is the fundamental confusion of one's own opinions and traditions for the Word of God. Therefore, if we would avoid the rise of Phariseism in our selves, we need to take the following steps:

### I. WE MUST BE ABLE TO RECOGNIZE THE TRADITIONALIST MENTALITY.

What is the "traditionalist mentality?" How do wrong traditions get started and perpetuated anyway? Someone gets a good idea about how to understand or apply God's will. Others like it, and soon it becomes the POPULAR way to interpret the passage. It is only a small step for this understanding to become the ONLY way to think about that particular point or the only way to do it. In time, the good reasons for the ideas are forgotten or become unimportant, or, they may even be no longer valid. The idea, however, continues to be promoted and perpetuated for itself, with no more support for it than its antiquity or its acceptance by people whose opinion is valued. Neglect of the idea becomes equivalent to neglect of the very Word of God it was intended to interpret and apply. At this point it is nothing but a habitual, ritualistic way of reacting. In fact, no thinking dare be done about it, for this would compromise one's orthodoxy in the eyes of those who unquestioningly accept the idea. Rethinking or re-evaluating the idea is the ultimate heresy, because to do so appears to question the goodness or rightness of the idea at its inception: "After all, our authorities must have had a good reason for accepting the idea in the first place, or they would not have taught it!" First, then, we see the unwillingness and/or the inability to examine critically the validity of one's own traditions, customs, opinions or interpretations. But the "traditionalist mentality" involves something more deadly than this.

The "traditionalist mentality" expresses a deep-rooted indifference toward those means whereby men may recognize the Word of God, distinguishing it from every other communication. The confirmed traditionalist cares more about maintaining the status quo than about distinguishing good traditions from those which are tendentious and false. In short, he presumes that everything he believes, does or teaches is automatically guaranteed valid by divine inspiration and enjoys the same divine authority characteristic of well-authenticated

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revelations, even though his views do not possess all the qualities demanded of messages revealed by authentic prophets. God has taught us, however, that His genuine revelations will be unveiled by prophets possessing the following characteristic credentials:

1. The true messenger of God must speak in the name of the Lord God of Israel, Javéh, in contrast with so-called "revelations" coming from any other source. (Dt. 18:9-22; Jer. 26:16)
2. The true prophet will offer supernatural credentials that cannot be falsified, either in the form of immediate, visible miracles, or predictive prophecies which, when precisely fulfilled, provide indisputable proof of the prophet's divine mandate. (Dt. 18:22; Ex. 4:1-9, 21, 29-31; 1 Kg. 18:36-38; 13:1-6; 14:1-18; Mt. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 12:12; Jn. 10:37f; 14:10f)
3. The true messenger of God must speak in harmony with the well-authenticated revelations which become the norm by which to judge all new revelations. (Isa. 8:16, 20; Jer. 26 esp. vv. 18, 20; 1 Co. 14:29) The older revelations constitute a "prophetic context" within which to evaluate all later ones. Remember the appeal of Jesus and the Apostles to the harmony existing between their own affirmations and the message of Moses and the prophets. (Cf. Ac. 26:22f; 17:11; 13:27-41; 15:15; 17:2; 18:28; 26:6f; 28:23; Ro. 1:2-5; 3:21; 2 Pt. 3:2)
4. The personal morality of the prophet should harmonize with his message. (Cf. 2 Co. 12:12; Mt. 7:16-20; Jn. 8:46) However, this characteristic may not always be present, since, for specific purposes and situations. God can make use of those who, at last, turn out to be wicked prophets. (Cf. Dt. 13:1-5; Nu. 22-24; 1 Kg. 13:11-32; Ezek. 14:1-11; Mt. 7:22f; 1 Co. 9:27)

What does not occur to the traditionalist, who imagines his human opinions, interpretations and traditions to have been inspired or dictated by God, is the fact that the original proponents of these very traditional opinions not only did not possess the above-mentioned prophetic credentials, but actually opened the door to direct apostasy from the living God and His true word. But the traditionalist seems immune to the following God-given defences against imposture:

1. If a predicted sign or wonder does not occur, the prophet has spoken presumptuously. (Dt. 18:21f; contrast 1 Sam. 3:19f)
2. If a prophet dares speak in the name of some other deity, he has not been authorized by Javéh. (Dt. 18:20)

3. Notwithstanding the verification of a true miracle done by a given prophet, if that prophet teaches apostasy from the Lord, he is false. (Dt. 13:1-5) This is also true of every type of false or wicked counsel or counsellor who, however not possessing divine credentials, already enjoys the confidence of those who must decide about him. (Dt. 13:6-18) "Apostasy" may include his ignoring the well-established "prophetic context" of genuine revelation. If his message will not harmonize with the undoubted Word of God, he is false.

Worse still, the traditionalist who embraces uncritically the claims or opinions of ANY so-called prophet, "inspired" tradition or "teaching authority guided by the Holy Spirit," by that act unwittingly relinquishes the definitive character of the Christian Gospel as the normative revelation of the will of God, i.e. as the now finally completed "prophetic context." The NT speaks of:

1. Itself as "the sound doctrine," "the pattern of sound words" (1 Ti. 1:10f; 4:1-6, 11, 16; 5:21; 6:1-4; 2 Ti. 1:13; 4:3f; Tit. 1:9; 2:1, 10, 15)
2. The importance of holding fast to the Apostolic documents and messages. (1 Ti. 1:3; 3:14f; 2 Ti. 2:2; 3:16f; 2 Th. 2:14; 3:6, 14)
3. The authority of the Apostles' doctrine. (Ro. 16:17; 1 Co. 2:6-16; 14:37; 2 Co. 12:1-12; Gal. 1:6-9, 12; Eph. 3:3-5; 1 Th. 2:13; 4:2, 8, 15, 18; 2 Pt. 3:2, 15f; 1 Pt. 1:12; 2 Jn. 10)
4. The decisive, conclusive and final character of the revelation completed during the lifetime of the Apostles themselves: (Heb. 1:1, 2; 2 Pt. 1:3f, 12; Jude 3; Ro. 16:17)
5. The danger of accepting as apostolic tradition some declaration that never was taught by any apostle. (Ro. 3:8; 2 Th. 2:2; Jn. 21:23)

Now, while there could be more texts, at least these teach that the Apostles expected their revelations to be received as normative for the Church, as sound doctrine, as the last word from God. And, while no clearcut statement of Scripture indicates the date "when the perfect comes" to take the place of "prophecy (which) will pass away; tongues (which) will cease; (miraculous?) knowledge (which) will pass away" (1 Co. 13:8f), nevertheless, nothing is ever to be received uncritically as from God. Rather, everything is to be judged and only what is decidedly from God is to be loved, practiced and taught. (Cf. 1 Jn. 4:1; 1 Th. 5:19-22; 1 Ti. 4:1; Rev. 2:2; 2 Th. 2:2)

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It just may be that God gave no date for the cessation of genuine prophecy, in order to be able to test every believer's faithfulness to that message "once for all committed to the saints." (Study Dt. 13:1-5.)

The key issue is, then, not "tradition versus tradition," i.e. ours against yours, because we all have traditions. Rather, the issue is good traditions as against bad ones, an issue that can be decided by seeking to know the **ORIGIN** of the traditions: "Are they of God, or are they of men?" (Study Mt. 21:23-27, esp. v. 25.)

But the attitude of the traditionalist effectively blocks any serious examination of his own intricately entangled beliefs and practice, because any admission that he really needs to rethink anything becomes a menace to his own psychological security based upon his belief system. But God intended that man's real certainty be based upon the very elements mentioned above that distinguish God's Word from every other! This is why the traditionalist deserves to be damned: he depends for his salvation upon his own unexamined belief system, rather than trust and utilize God's tools to correct his belief system so that he may have only divine truth to fill and transform his soul and save him for eternity!

But what of the traditionalist that is not merely indifferent and lazy, but sincere and conscientious, who wants to obey every detail of God's Law in order to please Him? If we would avoid becoming Pharisees, . . .

### II. WE MUST ALSO BEWARE OF THE THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF TRADITIONALISM.

Do traditionalists also have identifiable theological presuppositions? While there may be other factors that make a traditionalist what he is, for our purposes here, the key issue is this: what are the arguments behind the formation of traditions, arguments which urge the teaching and practice of the traditions once formed? Here are some:

1. Obedience to God means precise, conscientious and faithful performance of His Law. This good principle, however, is interpreted by the traditionalist in the sense that only punctilious of minutiae can satisfy the demands of God and is the only service pleasing to God.

2. Traditionalism must presume that God's will, as He left it for men in the Bible, is deficient, because it does not inform men about every detail he must know in order to be sure that he has observed God's Law in every detail.
3. Since obedience totally based upon law is not perfectly possible where God has not legislated every detail whereby the godly may know when they have faithfully, conscientiously and precisely fulfilled His Law, it becomes the supposedly essential function of pious scholars to formulate the missing details in order to supply the supposed deficiency in God's Law. The spectacle of a supposedly imperfect Law from a perfect God is an embarrassment which, according to the traditionalists, can be corrected only by supplying the missing details through the use of the best logic of which the sanctified human mind is capable.
  - a. This presumes, of course, that one man or any group of men is both capable and qualified to perfect the deficiency by using fallible human reason.
  - b. Those who sense the fallacy of their following human conclusions reached in this fashion yield to the temptation to attribute divine authority to the conclusions, even though the scholars themselves lack the aforementioned prophetic credentials absolutely essential to stamp their words as divine.
4. Next, the traditionalist presumes that the final result of this pious and scholarly "closing of the loop-holes" in God's Law can yet please God, bless mankind and still do so without adding any negative side effects, like, for example, breaking God's Word to keep these human rules. The essential reason for the existence of these traditions is the attempt to fill the empty spaces, the silence, the loop-holes in the Law of God, notwithstanding such warnings as Dt. 4:2; 12:32; *Prov. 30:5, 6!* Rev. 22:18f and similar.
5. Finally, when once the missing details are furnished in this fashion, they take on the force of divine law. Their observance has the force of obedience to God; their neglect means unfaithfulness to God. Otherwise, why bother?

The great, damning assumption behind all this kind of thinking is its fundamental criticism of God: "He did not tell us all that we believe we need to know—or desire to know—in order to do His will." There is also that presumption that sighs: "So we have to supply God's deficiencies!"

To measure just how real all this is, just think of the challenge

thrown down at Jesus by the Pharisees: *Why transgress the traditions of the elders?* Implied in this challenge are the following offensive propositions, all of which express the essential diversity between traditionalism and the religion of Jesus Christ:

1. There is a body of doctrines which is officially described as *of the elders*, of the Jewish Magisterium ("Teaching Authority"), but the question means: "Why transgress the doctrine of God as this is interpreted and taught by the elders?"
2. Whereas this doctrinal corpus is without authentic prophetic credentials and so is of human origin, it is nevertheless elevated to the level of divine revelation, a fact made clear by the nature of the test question itself, as well as by the motives of the examiners who so formulate it. It may even be exalted above it, as illustrated in the following quotations from the Palestinian Talmud (*Ber. i. 4* in Bowker, *op. cit.*, 154):

The words of the scribes are related to the words of Torah [the Law of Moses] and are to be loved like the words of Torah. . . . The words of Torah include both prohibitions and permissions; they include commands both of light and weighty importance, but the words of the scribes are all weighty. This can be known from the saying, "He who says that there should be no *tephillin* [phylacteries], thereby contradicting Torah, is without guilt, but [he who says] there should be five compartments thereby adding to the words of the scribes is guilty." . . . The words of the elders are weightier than the words of the prophets.

3. To violate, ignore or otherwise transgress the traditions of the elders is equal to a violation of God's Word. (Some extremists held that violation of the tradition was actually far more culpable than transgression of God's Word. *San. xi. 3; Ber. i. 4*)

The blindness of the traditionalists' philosophy lies in their inability seriously to question the rightness of these propositions.

In all fairness to the "elders" themselves whose traditions are so blindly followed and passed on by their disciples, we may well ask: "Did these 'fathers,' who are cited as originators and/or bearers of the sacred tradition, or who are cited as illustrations of the 'teaching authority' at work, did they consider themselves to be **PROPHETS** with the necessary credentials in order?"

1. If they actually considered themselves as prophets, where is the

historical documentation of their credentials?

2. If they did not consider themselves prophets, by what criteria should their disciples attribute them such authority? If a given Jewish Rabbi or a given Church Father knew himself to be un-inspired by the Holy Spirit with that special inspiration whereby God speaks to men by the prophets, by what right do later generations attribute it to him?

The "Fathers' " written opinions and interpretations of Scripture do contribute to the growth of tradition, but they are not therefore any more inspired or more divine than other men, despite all the wishful thinking of their disciples.

So, since we must beware of the "traditionalist mentality" and avoid the theological presuppositions of traditionalism, what is our salvation? What will keep us from becoming Pharisees?

### III. WE MUST CONSTANTLY COMPARE OUR BELIEFS WITH THE LAW OF CHRIST AND PRACTICE IT ONLY.

Before rejecting this truism as an oversimplification of the problem; let us at least examine it. The great issue before every conscientious soul is what to do with the "loop-holes in God's Law," or, to put it another way, how to deal with God's silence. That God has not spoken on many subjects is no surprise to anyone who has read the Bible.

In fact, most Christians are fairly familiar with God's revealed will when it comes to obeying the specific commands and the well-known prohibitions in His Word. But how should we go about solving the billion and one problems about which He has chosen not to speak in the Bible?

1. Should a Christian take any part in military service?
2. What precise definitions will establish a distinctively Christian style of dress, length of hair, etc.?
3. Should a Christian dance in any form of dance, anywhere?
4. What about birth control?
5. What should be our approach toward extracongregational ecclesiastical organizations?
6. To what extent is mourning for our dead a Christian expression and at what point does it become pagan?
7. Is it possible for a Christian to please God and smoke?

This list is but a beginning, but it indicates areas of discussion where

God has chosen not to reveal His specific will on these and many other specific subjects.

At this point we ask, "But doesn't God's Word cover EVERY phase of our lives? Isn't the Bible complete? Couldn't God foresee these problems and resolve them for us in His Word? How do we deal with them?" Others are tempted to answer, "Just pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in such matters," without realizing that the Law of Christ we are about to study IS THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT for just such decisions as we must make.

#### A. HOW IS THE LAW OF CHRIST EXPRESSED?

1. It is expressed generally in the word LOVE (Mt. 22:34-40; Ro. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13f)
2. It is expressed in some detail in the form of:
  - a. Clear, positive commands, exhortations, good examples and lists of virtues to imitate;
  - b. Express prohibitions, exemplar punishments, long lists of sins to eliminate;
  - c. Rules that govern our Christian liberty to act on questions not specifically treated in the other revelations of Scripture, i.e. in the areas where God has chosen to be silent.
    - (1) *Necessity*. These rules are needed in order to eliminate the need for a gigantic library of canon law that deals with every single case of every single individual ever to live on earth.
    - (2) *Nature*. These rules are a collection of directives to help us arrive at a suitable conclusion about matters that God has not discussed in His Word. However, THESE DIRECTIVES ARE HIS WORD intended to cover such cases, therefore we may not treat these rules with indifference nor ignore them as somehow unessential. They are the revelations of the Spirit purposely made to "close up the loop-holes."
    - (3) *Purpose*. God wants to leave Christians *genuinely free to decide and act responsibly*. So He liberates us from slavery to a detailed system that would compromise our freedom by dictating our everyday decisions. Again, He frees us from that slavish attention to legal detail that exalted law as a principle of self-justification. Finally, any law can command and prohibit many things, but no law yet written can describe in sufficient detail all the possible



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positive deeds and attitudes by which the man of God should react rightly in response to his God and his neighbor.

- (4) Here are some of these directives: 1 Co. 6:12—11:1; Ro. 14:1—15:7; Gal. 5:1-25. From these texts we derive the following:

### B. THE PRINCIPLES OF CONTROL BY WHICH WE DECIDE about matters God has not decided for us, i.e. THE DIRECTIVES THAT GOVERN CHRISTIAN LIBERTY:

1. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY STATED: "All things are lawful for me" (1 Co. 6:12; 10:23), except what God has ordered or prohibited, because our freedom can never be an excuse to disobey Him. Beyond what He has expressly forbidden or commanded, "nothing is unclean of itself" (Ro. 14:14, 20). "To the pure all things are pure" (Tit. 1:15), because "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." (1 Ti. 4:4f; 1 Co. 10:26; Mk. 7:19) So, we are really free to decide about such matters.
2. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY DIRECTED by the following principles:
  - a. *Pragmatic utility*: "Not all things are helpful," BUT SOME ARE. (1 Co. 6:12) If the thing under discussion fails to do the job for which it is intended, why use it?
  - b. *Enslavement*: "I will not be enslaved by anything." (1 Co. 6:12) We are morally obligated to acknowledge no other lordship than that of the Lord Jesus. (Consider the enslavement to habits that rob us of our spontaneity, intimacy and awareness of others. Think of enslavement to drugs, or worse, to unexamined ideas!)
  - c. *Honesty in the application of these rules*: "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh." (Gal. 5:13) "Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God." (1 Pt. 2:16) Shun immorality, idols, etc. (1 Cor. 6:18; 10:14; Ro. 3:8) No dishonest use of these rules can ever justify sin.
  - d. *Effect on others*: "Cause no stumbling" (Mt. 18:1-14; 1 Co. 8; 10:31—11:1)
  - e. *The right to dispense with our rights*: Any undeniable right may be dispensed with for sake of our neighbor, particularly

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- where the use of that right scandalizes a brother for whom Christ died. (Ro. 14:13-16; 1 Co. 9:12, 15, 18-23; 6:7)
- f. *Edification of others* is a positive good that should be sought in every decision: "Let us pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding." (Ro. 14:19; 15:2) "Not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor." (1 Co. 10:23f) "I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved." (1 Co. 10:33; cf. 1 Co. 8:1; Ro. 15:1f)
  - g. *Recognize the liberty of others to decide for themselves before God.* All decisions are strictly personal, not universal: "Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. . . . The conviction that you have keep between yourself and God." (Ro. 14:5b, 22)
  - h. *All decisions must reflect the true nature of the Kingdom of God* which does not consist in "food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." (Ro. 14:17f)
  - i. *Always decide a question leaning to the side of mercy.* (Mt. 5:7; 6:9, 12f; 9:13; 12:7; 18:15-35; Jas. 2:12f; 3:17)
  - j. *Do everything "for the Lord"* (Ro. 14:6-9), "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17), "as serving the Lord and not men" (Col. 3:22-24; Eph. 5:22, 25; 6:1, 5-9), "to the glory of God." (1 Co. 10:31)
  - k. *Accept as a brother in Christ everyone who is genuinely in Christ,* regardless of those differences of opinion that distinguish you. (Ro. 14:1; 15:7)
  - l. The last rule is that there may be more rules! There may be more directives in God's Word that should go on this list. These listed, however, are typical, but they are mandatory and not opinionable nor optional. They are God's revelations about how to deal with subjects about which He has chosen not to make His specific will known in each and every case.

It becomes increasingly clear, then, that decisions made on this kind of basis are going to vary from person to person, from congregation to congregation, and from century to century. According to this view, therefore, God has built into His system some directives that actually permit differences of opinion. This, then, is one area where complete uniformity is decidedly impossible. And God wants it that way! This is the reason behind the excellent motto:

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“In essentials, UNITY. In non-essentials, LIBERTY. In all things, CHARITY.”

We must be perfectly united in the essentials, proclaiming with one voice what God has expressly commanded or forbidden, as well as the above-listed rules which direct our free decisions as we express our Christian liberty. However, nothing God has omitted from His revelations can be considered essential, so in these very non-essentials we are truly free to exercise our liberty and grant the same freedom to others. But in our obedience to the essentials, as well as in our decisions about the non-essentials, the fundamental principle is always love.

To put it another way: “Where the Scriptures speak, we speak. Where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent.” This means that, when the Scriptures order or prohibit something, we must require only that which the Scriptures authorize, because these are the essentials. If the Scriptures require nothing for a given case, we may impose nothing either.

This same principle can be applied to the non-essentials by expressing it inversely: “Where the Scriptures speak, we must be silent and give our whole-souled obedience without complaint or objection. Where the Scriptures are silent, only then may we speak our opinion, for God has left us free to decide and act responsibly.”

Since these rules require that we think and act responsibly, some Christians in their immaturity are bound to reject them and never make use of them, choosing rather to let others do their thinking and deciding for them, or else continue in their traditional habits, indifferent to new truth and changing conditions, insensitive to people and, most tragically of all, insensitive to the normative revelation of the Word of God.

But our God has chosen to set us free from bondage to men and slavery to detailed systems, so that we might act in character as His sons. So, for those who love Jesus and are willing to submit to His will, even that part of His will where He would push them out of the nest to try their wings and learn to fly in the boundless liberty of the sons of God, their course is clear! And there is not a Pharisee among them.