

# Why Do Your Disciples Break the Tradition of the Elders?

**Matthew 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23; John 7:1**

**DIG:** According to Jewish tradition, what did the apostles do wrong? What **three areas** did Jesus find so hypocritical about the Pharisees and their **traditions**? How does the quote from Isaiah address the issue at hand? What is the source of true uncleanness? Why can't external things **defile** a person? What is the meaning of Yeshua's parable? Why didn't the talmidim understand it? Why was it easier to follow religious rules rather than to develop an intimate relationship with ADONAI?

**REFLECT:** Which of your family traditions would be difficult to change? What traditions do you follow that are part of your religious heritage? What do you do to appear holy? When are you most likely to uphold outward religious tradition rather than honor God in your heart? What is wrong with measuring spirituality by outward actions? How can you make sure traditions and outward actions do not replace true holiness? What can you do to have a pure heart?

Jesus' popularity sparked envy and concern among the religious leaders of His time. The **troublemaking Rabbi** was breaking too many rules. His **talmidim** were ignoring traditions held for centuries. A huge collection of rules for living had gradually developed that was supposed to reflect the central teaching of ADONAI's Word. Many of these, however, turned out to be subtle ways to deflect and actually contradict His **commands**, as Christ pictures here.

By the time of our **Savior**, the **tradition of the elders** or the Oral Law (see Ei - **The Oral Law**), had become equal with Scripture in the eyes of the Jews. In fact, to some Jews it had even become **greater** than the TaNaKh. **The rabbis taught that it was more punishable to act against the words of the Scribes, than the words of the Scriptures.** They had many other sayings that, in effect, said the same thing. **The rabbis had a saying, "He that says something he did not hear from his rabbi causes the Shechinah glory to depart from Israel."** They also said, **"He that contradicts his rabbis is he that will contradict the Shechinah glory. He that would speak against his rabbi is he that would speak against God."** Shockingly, the rabbis said, **"My son, give my people words of the rabbis, then give them the words of the Torah."** In that same line of thinking, the rabbis taught that to study the Scriptures was neither good nor bad. But to study the Oral Law was a good habit that brought reward.<sup>827</sup>

We have already seen two major areas of confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish leadership concerning the Oral Law: **fasting** (see Dq - **When You Fast, Put Oil on Your Head and Wash Your Face**) and **the proper ways of keeping the Sabbath** (see Cs - **Jesus Heals a Man at the Pool of Bethesda**), (Cv - **The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath**), and (Cw - **Jesus Heals a Man With a Shriveled Hand**). Here we see a third major confrontation over **hand washing**.

After this, Jesus went around in Galilee. He did not want to go about in Judea because the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill Him (John 7:1). From now to the end of His public ministry, hostility to Christ continued to grow. As the hatred of His opponents deepened, it meant that Yeshua could no longer move openly.

And some Pharisees and some of the Torah-teachers who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus (Matthew 15:1; Mark 7:1). Mark begins his account of this confrontation with the word **and**, or the Greek work *kai*. This connects what follows very loosely with what went on before; namely, contrast between the phenomenal popularity of the people and the extraordinary hostility of pharisaic Judaism.

They saw some of his talmidim eating bread with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed (Mark 7:2). Bread is plural in the Greek, and is preceded by the definite articles. The article points to some particular bread known by the Pharisees and the Lord. The plural number speaks of loaves of bread. The reference evidently was to the talmidim eating some of the bread preserved in the baskets from the mountainside near the town of Bethsaida (see Fn - **Jesus Feeds the 5,000**). There was no specific opportunity at that time to wash their hands, which would have been a good thing to do. But it was a much more serious issue with the Pharisees because they were thinking only in terms of their traditions.

The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders (Mark 7:3), or the Oral Law. The word elders referred to the members of the council (see Lg - **The Great Sanhedrin**). In early times the rulers of the people were chosen from the elderly men. The washing was done with the fist clenched. The person rubbed one hand on the arm up to the elbow with the other hand clenched. The "hand" was considered from the tip of the fingers to the elbow. Then that person would rub using the palm of the other hand with the other clenched, so as to make sure that the part that touched the food would be clean.<sup>828</sup>

When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. It was acceptable to touch ceremonially impure things, but the Oral Law said they needed to wash their "hands" from the elbow to the fingertips before eating. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles (Mark 7:4). The Jews were careful to wash their hands before eating anything. They wouldn't eat the smallest seed until they washed their hands first, even though Moses never commanded it.

Orthodox Jews today observe hand washing before meals. The rationale for it has nothing to do with hygiene but is based on the idea that "a man's home is his Temple," with the dining table his altar, the food his sacrifice and himself as the priest. Since the TaNaKh requires priests to be ceremonially clean before offering sacrifices on the bronze Altar, the Oral Law requires the same before eating a meal.<sup>829</sup>

To give you an idea of just how radically they were about this, here is what the Oral Law says about hand washing. The rabbis taught that it was better to have to walk four miles to water, than to be guilty of neglecting to wash their hands. They also said that the one who neglects hand washing was as bad as a murderer. Along that same line of thinking, they said the one who neglects hand washing is like one who goes to a prostitute. They also said that three sins bring poverty after them, and one of them is neglecting hand washing (In other words, if you don't want to die poor, wash your hands before you eat).<sup>830</sup>

But when Jesus didn't follow the traditions of men He was viciously attacked. So the Pharisees and Torah-teachers asked Jesus, "Why do Your talmidim break the tradition of the elders instead of washing their hands before they eat" (Matthew 15:2; Mark 7:5)? It is worth noting that the Pharisees and Torah-teachers never had a single opportunity to accuse Jesus of violating the Torah, because He kept it perfectly (see my commentary on Exodus Du - Christ and the Torah). Every argument they had, without exception, was over the Oral Law. This was the basis of His rejection. Then Jesus points out three areas where pharisaic Judaism was a sham.

First, He said the true nature of the traditions of men was hypocrisy. He replied: Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship Me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules (Mark 7:6-7; Isaiah 29:13). Legalism gives the outward sense of spirituality, or of being religious. They appear to be spiritual or religious because they live a legalistic lifestyle. They believe they are honoring and worshipping God by trying to keep this set of human rules.

Secondly, sometimes to keep the traditions of men, they actually had to *ignore* a divine commandment. You have [abandoned] the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men (Mark 7:8). Jesus admits to breaking the Oral Law, and, as we shall see later, He goes out of His way to break it.

Thirdly, sometimes to keep the traditions of men, they had to *reject* a divine commandment. Then He immediately gives an example of their hypocrisy. Yeshua's response was both simple and forceful as He answered their question with irony and biting sarcasm when He asked: Why do you break the command of God by your tradition (Matthew 15:3; Mark 7:9 CJB)? They made God's Word null and void, and stumbled untold many. For God said through Moses, "Honor your father and mother," and in conjunction with that mitzvah, the Torah also states that anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death (Matthew 15:4; Mark 7:10). At that point, it was still the commandment for breaking the Torah. But the Mishnah declared, "He who curses his father or mother is not guilty unless he specifically curses them with the name of ADONAI" (Sanhedrin 7. 8). Although these are clear Torah commands that any rabbi would surely respect, Messiah points out how, by means of a theological debate, the Oral Law skirted around the original intent of the commandment.

But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is "devoted to God" or Corban (Matthew 15:5; Mark 7:11). Yeshua was referring to the Oral Law when He responded with the phrase *but you say*, instead of the familiar wording *it is written*. At any time a Pharisee would wave his hand above his head and say the magic word: Corban, which meant *dedicated to the Temple treasury*, then anything he owned at that time became devoted, or set aside, for God. That meant he could do one of two things with his Corban. He could give all of it, or part of it, to the Temple treasury, or he could keep it for his own private use. What he could not do with it was to give it away for someone else to use.

Moshe said: Honor your father and mother (see my commentary on Exodus Do - Honor Your Father and Your Mother). The implication of that commandment was that children were responsible for the welfare of their older parents when they became incapable of taking care of themselves. That was what the Jews believed Moses meant when he gave that commandment. But the Pharisees were extremely reluctant to share their wealth with anyone who was not a Pharisee. The problem was their parents were not Pharisees. To skirt around the issue, if a Pharisee saw his father approaching, knowing he might ask for something, he would merely wave his hand above his head and say: Corban. When his father

stated **his** need, **the son** would say, "Golly gee dad, I wish you would have asked me earlier. I have just declared all of **my** possessions to be **Corban**." That was why **Jesus** said: **Then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you (Mattityahu 15:6-7; Mark 7:12-13).** Then **Yeshua** pointed out that this was not something new. He quoted a verse from the TaNaKh in which **Isaiah** rebuked some of his generation as well. **These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. They worship Me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules (Matthew 15:8-9).**<sup>831</sup>

Here is another example of their hypocrisy. **The Torah** said: **Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. On that day you shall not do any work (Exodus 20:8-11).** But many of **the Pharisees** wanted to be at the Temple, or would have to carry out business in different towns. So to get around this, the school of Sophim said, "Alright, we cannot go more than a Sabbath day's journey from where we live. So how do we define where our home is?" **They** defined a "home" was where your possessions were. This solved the problem! **They** would send out slaves standing a mile apart each holding one of **his** possessions. As a result, each mile was **his** "home." **They** did **many things like that.**<sup>832</sup>

We are reminded here that **Yeshua** came as **the Meshiach** for Isra'el and, as such, a prophetic voice to correct the errors of **His** generation. So in that sense, **Christ** called **His** generation (and really every generation) to a purer understanding of **the Torah** even if it means giving up some of **the traditions of men** that have accumulated over time. The Talmudic **tradition** is of great value and interest to both Jewish and Gentile believers today, especially in the context of understanding the Gospels that were written in the first century. In spite of that, there are times when **the tradition of the elders** must take a subordinate position to the written Word of **God**, just as **Jesus Christ** taught here.<sup>833</sup>

We know that external behavior and measurements are both highly inaccurate. Looks deceive as often as they convey the truth. But that's how we tend to judge other people until it occurs to us that **Ha'Shem** is neither impressed nor fooled by appearances. But **God** looks at **the heart**, and **He's** the expert at cleaning **hearts**. Being **pure** in **ADONAI's** sight doesn't mean we are perfect; but it means that we take steps to make sure that the internal and external aspects of our lives are consistent. King David would say: **Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from Me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me (Psalm 51:10-12; also see Second Corinthians 4:16-18; Hebrews 12:14).**<sup>834</sup>

At this juncture, **Yeshua** turned the discussion away from the **Pharisees** to the crowd around Him. Again **Jesus** taught the masses by the use of a parable so that only those of faith could understand Him. Not even His disciples understood at first (see **Ez - The Private Parables of the Kingdom in a House**). He called the crowd to Him and said: **Listen to Me, everyone, and understand this. What goes into someone's mouth** (like food) **does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth** (like the Oral Law), **that is what defiles them** (Matthew 15:10-11; Mark 7:14-15).

Then the apostles came to Him and asked: Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this (Matthew 15:12)? In response to Torah-teachers being offended, **Jesus** did not back down but instead continued His rebuke by saying two things. First, they are plants not planted by **God**. Thus, they must be uprooted. He replied: **Every plant that My heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots** (Matthew 15:13). Since those hypocritical leaders were not truly of **ADONAI**, **God Himself** would ultimately deal with them.

Secondly, they were **blind** guides leading **the blind**. **Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit** (Mt 15:14). The analogy was striking - the revered **guides** of the community were in fact **blind themselves** when it came to the **Messiah**. That **pit** of destruction would come in 70A.D. with the destruction of Jerusalem.

After He had left the crowd and entered the house of Peter, the Twelve spoke up and asked: Explain this **parable** to us (Matthew 15:15; Mark 7:17). So because He was alone with them, He explained its meaning. For the masses the purpose was to hide the truth, for His apostles, the purpose was to illustrate the truth (see **En - Four Drastic Changes in Christ's Ministry**).<sup>835</sup> The real issue was defilement. **Jesus** was trying to teach His talmidim that defilement was internal. The Pharisees taught that defilement was merely external. They believed that people were not defiled until they did something externally. But **Jesus** taught that internal decision is the point of defilement. **James**, the brother of **Jesus**, would say it this way: **When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me."** For **God** cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone; but everyone is tempted when, by their own evil internal desire, they are dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death (James 1:13-15).

**Yeshua's** elaboration came with a gentle rebuke: **Are you so dull?** **Jesus** asked them. **Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body?** He summarized His teaching by saying that **the things that come out of a**

**person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.** In saying this, the Lord declared all foods (not all things) clean (Matthew 15:16-18; Mark 7:18-20). By using the technical word **foods** any Jewish reader of the first-century would have understood that this referred to the **food** list of **the Torah** as found in **Leviticus 11:1-47**. These kosher **foods** were not defiled simply because the Oral Law was not to be followed.

It is important to understand that **Yeshua** was not abolishing the dietary commandments in **the Torah**. That would not be consistent with **His** own words: **I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah - not until everything that must happen has happened** (Matthew 5:18; Luke 16:17 CJB).<sup>836</sup>

**Peter** would raise the question in **Acts 10:9-15** and **Jesus** would have to teach this lesson to **him** all over again. Part of **Christ's** messianic mission was to make the distinction between clean and unclean in the realm of **food**. At **Messiah's** death, all meats became **clean**.

While certain physical defilements may pass through the biological system, there are more serious things that defile a person spiritually. **For out of the heart come evil thoughts - murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them** (Matthew 15:19-20; Mark 7:21-23). The teaching of **Christ** was simply emphasizing the priority of having a kosher **heart** through words and deeds.

Judas Iscariot was listening to the words of **Jesus**. He was the lone **apostle** who was not raised in **Galilee**, making him a conspicuous outsider in the group. He wore the same type of robe and sandals, covered his head from the sun, and carried a walking stick to fend off the wild dogs of **Galilee**, just like the rest of **the talmidim**. But his accent was from the south, not the north. So every time he opens his mouth to speak, Judas reminded the rest of the **apostles** that he is different.

Now **Messiah's** words about **evil thoughts** push Judas further away from **Him**. For Judas was a thief (John 12:6). Taking advantage of his role as treasurer, he regularly steals from the apostle's meager finance. Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, **poured about a pint of very expensive perfume made of pure nard on His head as He was reclining at the table**. Judas alone was indignant, insisting that it be sold and the profit be placed in the group's communal **moneybag** - all so that he might steal money for his own use. Now **Jesus** was reminding him that *he* was **defiled**.

Judas considered being morally **defiled** in Galilee not merely a spiritual state of mind; it was to enter a different class of people altogether. Such a man would become an outcast, fit only for backbreaking jobs such as tanning or mining, destined to own no land and be poor for all his days. Judas had seen these people in the crowds that flocked to see **Jesus** simply because they had no chance in life and **He** offered them hope. They had no families, no farms, and no roof over their heads. Others turned to a life of crime, becoming criminals and outlaws, banding together and living in caves. Their lives were hard and they died hard.

This was not the kind of life Judas had planned for himself. If **Yeshua** was **the Meshiach**, as Judas believed, then **the miracle-working Rabbi** was destined to one day overthrow the Roman occupation and rule Judea. Judas' role as one of **the Twelve** would ensure him a most coveted and powerful role in the new government when that day came.

Judas apparently believed in the teachings of **Messiah**, and certainly enjoyed the attention that came with being one of **His apostles**. But his desire for material wealth would override any spiritual gains. The betrayer would put his own needs above those of his **Rabbi** and the other **talmidim**. For a price, Judas was capable of doing just about anything.<sup>837</sup>

But getting back to **the tradition of the elders**, its **evil** stems from the fact that it takes **God's** high holy standard of perfection, and pulls it down into the gutter of human self-sufficiency. To live perfectly by **the Torah** was, and is, an impossible task. **Jesus Christ** is the only person to have fulfilled **the whole Torah**, never violating any commandment. Rabbi Sha'ul tells us that the commandments of **the Torah** were sent to the Jews to act as a **tutor** to bring them to **Christ (Galatians 4:1-7 KJV)**. **God's** plan was that when the Jews realized that the 613 commandments of **the Torah** were impossible to keep, they would have looked for **the Messiah**. But the Oral Law lowered **God's** high holy standard of perfection to something the Jews could actually do. For example, if you were a tailor and **the tradition of the elders** said that you couldn't carry your needle for more than twenty-five steps on the Sabbath because it would then be considered work. So which is easier? Not carrying your needle for twenty-five steps, or remembering and observing the Sabbath and keeping it holy? The answer is obvious. For the most part, the Jews could actually *do* what the Oral Law required. But they could never consistently do what **the Torah** required. The end result was that **the traditions of men (Mark 7:8)** eliminated the need for **the Messiah** and sure enough, when **He** came - they missed **Him**. All because of the Oral Law. No wonder **Christ** despised it and would have nothing to do with it. As a result, **the Jewish leaders there were looking for a way to kill Him (John 7:1)**.

*Dear **Father God**, **Your Son** always knew the line between obeying the letter of the Torah and the spirit of the Torah. **He** gave me a good example to follow. Help me to do that. Guide me into an understanding of **Your** desires that keeps the **heart**-issues in mind and doesn't get sidetracked about appearances. Develop in me the integrity of a **pure heart**.<sup>838</sup>*