

Tradition and Defilement

Matthew 15:1-20

(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh.)

1. The Pharisees Confront Christ over Tradition
2. Christ's Response to the Pharisees
3. The Example: Honor Your Father and Mother
4. Tradition Used to Nullify the Word of God
5. The Old Testament Parallel
6. Traditions Are Not True Worship
7. Christ Offends the Pharisees
8. Stay Away From Blind Guides
9. Christ's Explanation of Defilement
10. Legalism Results from Emphasis on Externals
11. The Pressure Toward Legalism
12. The Word Our Authority

The pattern of development in Matthew 15 follows the same pattern evidenced in Matthew 14: opposition to the ministry of Christ followed by His withdrawing which is then followed by the performance of a miracle. After the opposition is manifested in Matthew 15, Jesus withdraws from the area because He does not want activities to build to a climax yet. That climax will occur approximately a year later at Jerusalem at His crucifixion, but it is not God's time for that yet.

1. The Pharisees Confront Christ over Tradition

The first half of Matthew 15 shows what is going on in the religious world today. Christ shows how religious traditions affect one's view of the Word of God. Things really have not changed in thousands of years. Jesus indicates that the situation in His day is just as it had been in the days of Isaiah, almost 800 years before Christ. Comparing the scene today with the situation in Isaiah's day and in Christ's day, the trends are the same. The tendency is for religious traditions to supplant the Word of God; people become more committed to their religious traditions than to God's Word. Even today the Word of God has been replaced by the traditions and practices of the church. As a result, millions of people would die for the traditions of their church, but they know very little if anything about the Word of God. Loyalty has been gradually shifted from the Word of God to the traditions and practices of religious people.

Matthew 15 opens by focusing attention on some key people. **"Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem"** (v. 1). This introduces the conflict between Christ and the traditions of the religious leaders. The scribes and Pharisees become the focal point of the conflict in this passage. The scribes are the official interpreters of the Mosaic Law. They have the responsibility of guarding the integrity of the Old Testament. In carrying out their responsibility, they developed a whole system of traditions and practices to enable people to understand the Word of God. The scribes give the official interpretation of the Old Testament that is followed by the Pharisees. As the Pharisees confront Christ, they bring with them their authorities, the scribes.

John's parallel account of these events relates that they occurred at the time of the Passover at Jerusalem. These events apparently occurred immediately after Passover because the Pharisees and scribes would not think of being absent from Jerusalem at the time of Passover. But during this Passover season there was probably enough discussion about Christ and His ministry to cause the leaders to realize that they must confront Him about what was happening. Christ did not go up to Jerusalem to this Passover which occurred one year before His crucifixion because of the opposition which was present in Jerusalem. So the religious leaders sent a delegation from Jerusalem to confront Christ in the region of Galilee.

Those confronting Christ in Matthew 15 were official representatives from the capital of the nation. They had come to discredit Christ and to attack his ministry. They launched right in with an accusation in Matthew 15:2: **“Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.”**

They are questioning the activity of the disciples. When these religious leaders ask Christ why His followers do not observe the tradition of the elders, they are actually attacking Him because He is responsible for His disciples. These leaders are not concerned that the Word of God is at stake. Their concern is the tradition of the elders, the matters which have been passed down from generation to generation from the forefathers in Jerusalem. These transmitted traditions eventually became binding religious obligations. The particular tradition they take issue with is washing the hands before eating.

Mark 7 relates the same account and elaborates on some of the traditions involved, such as washing your hands, washing pots and pans and other sacred traditions. The requirements came to be quite elaborate. A couple of hundred years after Christ, these oral traditions were committed to writing in such documents as the Jewish Mishnah, the Gemara and the Talmud, the latter probably being the most familiar. These were large and voluminous writings. These volumes were full of traditions that were added to the Mosaic Law to help the Jews keep the Law. God told them in the Old Testament that He wanted them to be clean, and these writings were added in order to explain what it meant to be clean.

For example, if you went to the market place, you would bump into Gentiles as you worked your way through the crowd of people. Any Jew who touched a Gentile was considered unclean. It was then necessary to wash your hands ceremonially before every meal in order not to defile yourself. The Old Testament Law did not command you to wash your hands before eating, but the tradition said you should. So the elements at stake in these writings were traditions, not the commandments of the Old Testament.

2. Christ's Response to the Pharisees

Christ in His response does not become embattled over the issue of observing traditions. There is no debate on that subject at all because His disciples were obviously breaking the traditions. But the issue Christ confronts is whether or not those traditions are important. Christ is going to tell these Pharisees that they do not even know what is important any more. They want to go to battle over traditions, yet they are breaking the Word of God!

Incidentally, any time someone is ready to battle over church traditions or religious practices, he really does not understand the Word of God. If he understood the Word of God, he would realize that the traditions have nothing to do with pleasing God. Traditions are related only to pleasing men.

Jesus, in response to the Pharisees, asks a more searching question in Matthew 15:3: **“And He answered and said to them, ‘Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’”** The two issues at stake are the transgression of tradition by Jesus' disciples and the transgression of the Word of God by the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus' question to them was another way of saying, *Why do you make your traditions more important than the Word of God?* Tradition generally starts out as something which supports the Word of God, but the longer traditions are practiced, the more important they become. Pretty soon keeping the traditions is more important than studying the Word of God. All you have to do to see that today is look at the number of Roman Catholic or Protestant churches where those in attendance do not study the Word of God. They observe certain traditions and practices instead. The Word of God has been subtly replaced by traditions.

Jesus Christ is very direct in His confrontation. He tells the people that the issue at stake is the Word of God in conflict with their traditions. He tells them that they are failing to keep the Word of God because of their traditions. Right away they would look for an example, so He does not even wait for their question.

Matthew 15:4 begins, **“For God said.”** The issue at stake is what men say as opposed to what God says. The problem with tradition is that the two become blurred so that people begin to think that what God says and what tradition says are the same thing. But God does not need tradition to help Him out.

3. The Example: Honor Your Father and Mother

Jesus continues from the Mosaic Law with His example in Matthew 15:4: **“For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.’”** This is the first of the Ten Commandments to be given with a promise, and it helps emphasize how important God saw the commandment to be. Those who disobeyed it were put to death.

Notice that the commandment was not just related to doing evil to your father or mother, but it included even speaking evil of them. I could diverge at this point and go into the importance of honoring your parents, but I will not take time to do that. However, it is necessary to be reminded of how God views this command in His Word. Children are to honor their parents, and this command goes beyond merely respecting them. It means doing whatever is necessary to meet their needs and to see that they are cared for. Judaism did not have many rebellious children. When children disobeyed the Law, the command was very simple. Those who failed to honor and obey their parents were executed!

It seems like a pretty simple commandment. But in Matthew 15:5,6 Jesus tells how the Jews got around it: **“But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God,” he is not to honor his father or his mother.’”** The Jews by their tradition had come up with a plan. They said that if you would devote what you had to God, then you could not give it to any other human being, not even to your parents.

Mark 7:11 indicates that they declared what they had *“Corban.”* This was a way of taking an oath and committing what they had to God. If a person said his possessions were *Corban*, he was taking a vow that what he had belonged to God. If he found out his parents had a need, he simply apologized saying that what he owned had been devoted to God and he could not give it away to anybody else. The catch is interesting. He could keep it and use it for himself, but he could not give it to anybody else. Therefore, tradition had provided a way around the clear teaching of the Word of God so that tradition superseded God’s Word. If the owner said it was *Corban*, it no longer mattered what God said about honoring his parents. The commitment to tradition took precedence.

Some people conclude that these Jews were really nasty. But look around and see the attitude of people today toward caring for their elderly parents. Many people are looking for ways around that responsibility, hoping to give their responsibility to someone else. People have not changed. Materialism is what the unbeliever is made of because he is devoted to this life and the things of this life. The materialism of this age is no different from materialism in previous ages, because the unbeliever has always been materialistic. This is an example of how the Jews observed their religious traditions. Those traditions nullified the Word of God. When tradition and God’s Word clashed, they obeyed their tradition.

4. Tradition Used to Nullify the Word of God

If you talk with the average unbelieving Protestant or Catholic today, you can see so many areas where religious practices conflict with the Word of God. In such cases precedence has been given to tradition. People are depending on tradition and the practices of their church, and they are not depending on the Word of God.

Jesus continued His charge against them in Matthew 15:6: **“And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition.”** The word translated **“invalidated”** is actually the word for *“authority”* with a negative prefix. He is saying that they have made the Word of God without authority, null and void. Where God speaks on a subject, they have something that overrules it, the traditions of the elders.

Do not think that such overruling of the Word of God no longer happens. The situation is the same with Catholics and Protestants today. The same thing could probably be said of Jewish circles as well, but we primarily relate to Catholics and Protestants so I will limit my discussion to those two major groups. I do not feel that either group is necessarily worse than the other. I believe we are all in the same boat. A line from the Council of Trent regarding Roman Catholic tradition is a good example. *“They [the church traditions] are to be held with the same pious affection and reverence as the holy Scriptures.”* When you do that over a period of time, the commitment changes to the traditions rather than to the Word of God, even in great Protestant denominations which started during the Reformation under the slogan, *Sola Scriptura*, meaning only the Scriptures. Today if you go into some of those denominations, people do not even carry their Bibles to Church and are basically ignorant of what the Bible says. Yet they are going through certain patterns that have been passed down, assuming that those traditions will make them acceptable to God.

If you would like to find out how important those traditions are to such people, stop someone coming out of church and challenge one of his religious traditions that is not biblical and see what kind of response you get. If I say something against someone else's religious practices, I get more response than for anything else I do. That is because these are the things which are precious and have become sacred to many people. If you say something against someone's religious practices or traditions, you have walked on sacred ground. That is exactly what Jesus Christ does in Matthew 15. With both feet He stomps on the precious traditions of the Jews and their leaders. He does this because the traditions are in conflict with the Word of God, and when you obey traditions you nullify the Word of God.

5. The Old Testament Parallel

Following tradition is not something new. Jesus says that those who follow tradition are in the same situation as the people Isaiah prophesied about in Isaiah 29:13. **"You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men'"** (Matt. 15:7-9).

Jesus deals with people in two different ways. When He deals with the multitude—the harlots, prostitutes, thieves and other sinners—He confronts them in compassion and invites them to His salvation. But when He deals with the religious leaders, He approaches them with bluntness and hardness. This approach is obviously not going to win Him any friends. He does not approach them cautiously as though He is trying to help them understand better. He confronts them directly by saying, **"You hypocrites"** (v. 7). This particular word is used only in the gospels. It is used repeatedly in Matthew 23.

Jesus is saying that these scribes and Pharisees are in the same condition as the people to whom Isaiah prophesied. Almost 800 years earlier during Isaiah's day, the people had been caught up in religious traditions and practices and were not submitting to the authority of God's Word. Jesus tells the people of His day that they are in the same condition. That means they say they want to worship and honor God and do what is pleasing to Him, but their hearts are far away from Him. You can know that by seeing that they are not obeying the Word of God. They are obeying their traditions instead.

The result of this worship is seen in Matthew 15:9: **"But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men."** False teachers teach as their doctrine the precepts of men rather than the instructions of God, and the result is vain worship. Nothing happens with such acts. God is not honored, neither is He worshiped. True worship takes place in the realm of the inner person under the control of the Holy Spirit and in accord with the truth of God. True worship is not going through a certain routine or a set of activities. Proverbs 28:9 puts it very bluntly: **"He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination."** When you do not worship God according to His Word, even your praying is an abomination to Him.

6. Traditions Are Not True Worship

Unfortunately, many have lost sight of that. The pressure is on even Bible-believing Christians to be careful of tradition. Doing the same religious activity over a period of time becomes solidified in our minds as a sacred practice.

All we have to do to see that is to change the order of our Sunday morning service. Someone invariably says, *"I didn't feel like I could worship God this morning."* It is almost as though our worship of God *depends* upon starting out with a call to worship by the choir, singing a congregational number, reading Scripture, listening to a choir anthem followed by the message, then closing in prayer. There is no Biblical passage which tells us that is true worship. I sometimes wonder what would happen if I started my sermon first.

If we made such a change, that would not indicate worship or a lack of worship. But it is so easy to fall into a pattern and think that pattern is what constitutes worship.

Some who have come from churches where following the form was very important find a tremendous adjustment in a different type of service. It is because their practices and routines became inseparably associated in their minds with worship. If we follow the same practices year in and year out, a subtle change begins to occur. Pretty soon the Word of God is not being taught in a regular, systematic way, and before long someone gets up and simply mentions Scripture. More human ideas and less Scripture are used. But if it is all done in the same order, the participants become

lulled into it. They think they worshiped because they sat and stood at the right times. It seemed like worship because they went through a certain set of activities, rituals or traditions.

We dare not think such a subtle change could never happen to us. If we are not careful, we begin to embellish the Word with our traditions, and those traditions begin to take equal place with the Word of God. We no longer consider whether the Word of God is taught honestly, accurately and consistently, but instead we look at the externals and the traditions. When that happens, we have elevated our traditions to the place of the Word of God. With the passing of time the balance will be tipped, and the traditions will become more important than the Word.

People in some churches will go to battle over the order of the service or where the individuals sit. In the church I served while a seminary student, individuals had customary places where they sat. They did not feel they could worship if they did not sit in their customary places. When I closed off the back two rows, some people who had come to that church for forty years never came back because we took out their benches. They simply could not worship God any more. Someone should have taken out that bench thirty-nine years before and saved them a lot of time! They were not doing anything when they came.

We must be careful that we do not confuse the externals with the Word of God. There is nothing wrong with having an order of service, but we must be careful that we do not associate order with worship. Worship goes on in the inner being between the person and God if it is done according to His Word.

7. Christ Offends the Pharisees

Jesus has already said enough to set the Pharisees on edge, but He wants to be sure everybody knows what He is talking about. So He next addresses the multitudes.

Matthew 15:10,11: “After Jesus called the crowd to Him, He said to them, ‘Hear and understand. It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man.’” Can you imagine the reaction of the Pharisees when Jesus tells them that the issue is not external things, but instead it is internal? He is telling them that it is not what they eat or drink or how they eat and drink it.

Defilement comes from the inner character. Jesus will shortly elaborate on that point, but the disciples are getting a little uneasy. Have you ever been in the presence of an enthusiastic believer as he shared the truth of the Word and seen the negative reaction of people? As you realized the people did not like what they were hearing, you probably became progressively more uncomfortable and perhaps even wished you could take the believer by the arm, lead him aside and tell him to cool it a little bit because the people did not like what he was saying. That is the way the disciples are in this situation.

The response of the disciples is recorded in Matthew 15:12: **“Then the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?’”** Did Jesus think the religious people would not be offended when He called them hypocrites and told them they had totally nullified the Word of God by their traditions? The disciples are suggesting that Jesus is being a little too harsh and that He should try a different approach. Keep in mind that when Jesus deals with false religious leaders, He exhibits no flexibility and deals sternly and severely. As a result they were offended and stumbled over His statement.

Jesus did not refrain from making the statement simply to keep from offending them. He indicated that if they were offended, that was their problem, because it evidenced the fact that they were not believers. This is a reminder that we are not to compromise the Word of God to the point of saying it in such a way that it is not offensive to religious leaders who do not believe.

The explanation Jesus gave is very simple. **“But He answered and said, ‘Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted’”** (Matt. 15:13). He is saying that these individuals do not belong to His Father and they will be uprooted. When you read His statement, you cannot help but think of the parable of the tares in Matthew 13. In that parable, the tares will be rooted up at the judgment and cast into the fire. He identifies them as tares. Would you expect them not to be offended? Of course they are offended, but they are not His Heavenly Father’s plants.

When you are faced with the possibility of offending religious leaders, do not be worried about whether they will be offended. We are not supposed to have anything to do with them anyway. The disciples were probably wondering how they were ever going to work together with the Pharisees if Jesus kept offending them like that. Well, the answer is very simple. They were not to work together. How is a Bible-believing pastor going to be accepted at most ministerial fellowships if he keeps saying things about false religious leaders? The solution is clear: those who accept the Bible do not belong in those relationships.

8. Stay Away From Blind Guides

Jesus' instructions are very clear. **"Let them alone"** (Matt. 15:14). Jesus does not give recommendations, He gives commands. This is a command, an aorist imperative. He says to let them alone and have nothing to do with them. It is not really a problem if they are offended, because they do not belong to His Heavenly Father. So the disciples should stay away from them. That command is simple enough. Jesus continues, **"They are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit"** (v. 14). They have no idea where they are going, but they are going to judgment. And all the spiritually blind who are following them are going the same way—to judgment. Believers are to stay away from such leaders.

It is a tragedy that some believers remain in unbelieving churches to do evangelism. They say they are there to be a testimony, but in staying they have done exactly the same thing the Pharisees have done. The traditions of the Pharisees replaced the Word of God. People in such churches today are really saying that even though Christ says to leave them, they have a better idea: They are going to be a witness there. They have placed their idea above the Word of God and its clear commandments. They may think their situation is an exception, but that is only another indication that they think they have a better idea than God. Such believers have, in effect, nullified the Word of God because they are doing what they have decided to do even though God said to do differently. It amazes me that some believers stay in churches led by religious leaders who do not know Jesus Christ to supposedly be testimonies. How can you be a testimony for Jesus Christ when you are there in rebellion against Him? The only thing that makes our lives and service effective for Him is submission to the Spirit. How can the Holy Spirit use us if we are rebelling against what He has said? Satan is very subtle even in twisting our thinking in such areas.

God speaks to Judah in Hosea 4:17 and says, **"Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone."** God's pattern is to have nothing to do with false teachers. This does not mean that we cannot share the gospel with unbelievers. These instructions are in the context of religious leaders who are blind guides of the blind. I cannot take part in a church service that is led by a blind religious leader. I cannot be part of a ministerial fellowship with unbelieving ministers. Of course, there are ministerial fellowships composed of believing ministers, and that is a different situation. But I can never be associated with unbelieving religious leaders. To do so would make my work and their work seem to be the same kinds of work, but they are totally different. This does not mean I would never have one in my home for dinner so I could talk to him about the gospel of Christ. But I could not be associated in any way with him in the ministry or in any way that would cloud the differences that exist. Keep in mind that Jesus is talking primarily about religious leaders in this context. They are the focal point of His harshness.

Paul wrote of the separation of believers from unbelievers in 2 Corinthians 6:14-17: **"Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, 'I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,' says the Lord. 'And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you.'"**

This passage is often quoted in the context of marriage. I believe it is proper to apply this section to marriage as it may be applied to a variety of areas. But that is not its direct interpretation. Marriage is not even in the context. The immediate context is religious associations and activities. Believers are not to be associated with unbelievers and their religious activities in any way.

There are further applications of this passage which are appropriate. The application of this principle keeps me from being involved in certain fraternal organizations or clubs. Neither would I be free to join in a business partnership with

an unbeliever. That would bind me together in an unscriptural way. But the immediate significance of this passage relates to religious activity. As one of the redeemed who is obedient to the Word of God, I must stand apart from false religious worship and activity.

If the instruction of these verses and this truth of God's Word were honored above our own ideas, there would not be any believers in unbelieving churches. A believer cannot remain a part of an unbelieving religious system and be true to the Word of God.

A believer who stays in such a religious environment thinks he is a strong Christian. The reason he thinks so is because he measures himself against unbelievers, and even a newborn Christian is miles ahead of a non-Christian. But if a believer stays in such an environment over a period of time, he fails to grow spiritually. He is not nourished according to God's plan and so remains a spiritual pigmy without knowing it. This is another trap of the Devil to nullify our effectiveness as believers.

9. Christ's Explanation of Defilement

In Matthew 15:15 Peter comes to the fore again. When he stepped out of the boat as recorded in Matthew 14, he became prominent and remains so through the rest of the Gospel of Matthew. As a spokesman for the group, Peter speaks up. It doesn't matter to him that he may have a dumb question. **"Peter said to Him, 'Explain the parable to us'"** (Matt. 15:15). Peter is referring to the difficult, harsh statement that Jesus made to the crowd in Matthew 15:11: **"It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles the man, but what proceeds out of the mouth, this defiles the man."**

Jesus replied in Matthew 15:16, **"Are you still lacking in understanding also?"** This is not a new truth that Jesus has presented. It was true in the Old Testament as well. Jesus continued to explain the point. **"Do you not understand that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and is eliminated?"** (v. 17). He has just stated a very simple physical fact. It does not take a lot of thinking to realize that when you eat food, it goes into your stomach and then passes out of your body. **"But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man"** (v. 18). The heart is the inner man, it is what you are as a person. What you eat does not change you as a person, it simply passes right on through as some nourishment is taken out, but it does not change your character. But what comes out of your inner being reflects what you are. **"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders"** (v. 19). The source of sinful activity is within us. It is not related to what we eat.

If you asked a murderer why he killed four people, you would be surprised if he indicated it was because he had chicken noodle soup for lunch! The point is clear: what we eat does not change our character.

Sinful behavior comes from the heart. That is what Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Lust, adultery and other sins occur in the heart and they are looking for the opportunity to carry out the act. But our character is established by what we are on the inside and is manifested in the things we do and say. We are defiled by what we are, not by what we eat or drink.

Many good believers eat the same things that wretched, sinful murderers eat, but the food does not affect the character. It is easy to lose sight of that and think of the externals as the things that defile us. But we have already seen that defilement does not come from external things. **"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man"** (Matt. 15:19,20).

Even though the Jewish tradition said that if you failed to wash your hands before eating you were defiled, that does not defile you before God. It may defile you before men, but not before Him. It is important to keep that in mind, because the externals all constantly bear down on us. That can then degenerate into legalism.

10. Legalism Results from Emphasis on Externals

Legalism results when people decide that the Word of God is not adequate and add rules and regulations. Some churches have covenants stating that not only will their members obey the Word of God, but they will also not smoke, drink, go to movies, wear long hair, wear sleeves above the elbow, play pool or ride a bike on Sunday. By making such lists they are saying that the Word of God is good as far as it goes, but their explanation is needed for the elaboration.

They want to explain what God means when He says to be separate. That is exactly what the Pharisees were doing. When God said be clean to be separate, the Pharisees declared that He meant you should do certain things.

Jesus said that these added requirements do not make any difference to God at all. *“Well, wait a minute!”* you say. *“As for as I’m concerned, going to movies defiles you before God.”* Would you mind showing me where in the Bible it says that? *“Well,”* you say, *“they didn’t have movies in those days.”* All right, then what is another one? Show me in the Bible where it says, *“Thou shalt not have a glass of wine with your dinner.”* I am not recommending wine for dinner. I will not have any with mine today, but I cannot find a verse that goes further than saying one should not get drunk.

You may think I am getting into some borderline areas when I bring up these points, but do you see what happens when people start adding restrictions? When people think they need to help the Word of God out, the result is trouble. When people decide that they need to help you by giving you some things in addition to what the Word of God says, then they are doing the same thing the Jews did. Some people are fearful that if you do not follow their traditions, you are likely to misunderstand the Word of God, so they want to help you out by adding their lists. They feel that what God says is good as far as it goes, but in their church they have practiced these guidelines for years and years. Strangely enough though, you find out that they measure your spirituality not by how you submit to the Word of God and live your life under the control of the Spirit. Your spirituality is measured instead by whether you have dressed appropriately, worn your hair appropriately, avoided certain places and been at other places.

What has happened in those situations? Tradition has superseded the Word of God. I am not saying that you should go to movies if it violates your conscience. You should do nothing that violates your conscience or that you are not comfortable God wants you to do. But if God did not say, *“Thou shalt not,”* I may feel free to do it even though you may not have that freedom, and you have to accept that.

This does not rule out all order. We have regulations in our church. We start and end our church services at a certain time. We ask you to park in a certain way in the parking lot. That is not legalism, because we do not say that your relationship to God depends upon where you park. We simply say it will keep you from getting your car towed away! These regulations have nothing to do with your relationship with God. They are only related to your being able to find your car when you leave!

Legalism says certain things are necessary for you to be acceptable to God. That is what makes the difference between regulations and legalism.

I am not saying that because we have our services on Sunday at certain times, that makes us more acceptable to God. I am simply saying that it works more conveniently for us to do that because in our society Sunday has been set aside for worship. But if there were a change in society and we worked different schedules and so we changed our services to Friday at 4:30 p.m. and Wednesday at 9:00 a.m., that would be just as acceptable to God. *“Oh, you don’t know about the Sabbath?”* Yes, I do. The Sabbath was yesterday. This is Sunday, remember? The Sabbath is the seventh day. We even get confused on that word.

11. The Pressure Toward Legalism

Paul found the pressure toward externals in the churches he established. He wrote in Colossians 2:16, **“Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.”**

Human beings do not need to decide what you eat or drink, what your religious holidays will be, or what days you worship. They cannot say that if you are going to be acceptable to God, you must do this and not do that.

Paul continued his argument in Colossians 2:20-23: **“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in**

self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.” This is God’s evaluation of such rules. All these things may look good to men. They may have the appearance of wisdom. But God sees them as **“of no value against fleshly indulgence”** (v. 23).

Such regulations are evident in some of the cults. Their dietary habits and their physical requirements cause some to admire the way they take care of their bodies. Some people want to use defilement of the body as an argument against smoking. They argue that the believer’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and it is. But go back and read what Jesus said in Matthew 15. He said that what goes in the mouth, even if it is nicotine, does not spiritually defile me as a person. “Aha,” you say, “*Gil wants us to smoke!*” This is not what I am saying. Smoking does not defile my body spiritually even though it may have physical consequences. Going to a movie theater does not defile my body. A chair in a movie theater could be placed in a church auditorium. It may even be made by the same manufacturer, or it may be more comfortable than a seat at church. But the seat in that theater does not defile my body. These things do not defile me as a person.

I do believe we ought to take care of our bodies. I exercise even though I do not like to do it. I believe there is value in exercise, but it does not make me more acceptable to God. Neither does it make my body a more pleasing dwelling place for Him. I must be careful that I not use the members of my body for unrighteousness, but that is a different story. When God says don’t do it, I had better not do it. When I have a guilty conscience about doing it, I had better not do it. If I participate in something with a guilty conscience, to me that is sin. But that is a different issue. I cannot smoke if I have a guilty conscience about it before God. If I feel it is wrong for me to do it, then it would be sin if I did. Quite frankly, that is the issue for me regarding smoking, not the issue of its defiling effect on my body. A personal conviction is the issue in all of these things. That is why you may be free to do something and I am not.

We may sit down to have a meal together, and you may indicate that you generally have wine with your meal. If you offered me a glass, I would say I personally prefer not to, but you are free to. However, if you start getting drunk, then I have to tell you that you are in violation of the Word of God.

Spirituality is not a matter of whether I drink a certain thing or do not drink a certain thing. It is a matter of my personal relationship with God. Our focus as believers must continually be on the Word of God because that is what matters. I have my own personal convictions which I must follow before God. You have your own convictions. But what the Word of God says is binding upon us all.

In this consideration of the impact of legalism, guidelines for proper conduct by believers in questionable areas have not been addressed. There are legitimate reasons for believers not to participate in some of the questionable activities already mentioned. In other studies I have addressed some of those guidelines. But those issues are separate considerations, not really related to the study of legalism in Matthew 15.

I am not encouraging participation in any of these questionable areas. These questions must be handled on an individual basis, but the pressure is toward legalism. There is frequently a desire to codify our dos and don’ts. Some feel it would be helpful if we all did the same thing. For example, some would be more comfortable if we would all agree that none of our kids go to dances. But if we decide we will not do this and we will not do that, before long we are saying that the Word of God is not adequate.

It is easy to look back at the Jews and wonder why they had all those traditions. But all the traditions of the Protestant and Catholic churches put into books would rival the Talmud! Then people would think that because they are doing those things, they are better Christians. If we make our lists and give them enough time, those things become more important than the Word of God. Then why spend time in the Word of God anymore? We could spend it on our traditions. Traditions are easier anyway because they are tangible, physical things we can see.

I cannot see your heart, but I can see whether you washed your hands before dinner or not. I cannot see your heart, but I can see whether you drink wine at dinner or not, whether you smoke, go to movies, or whatever. If we are not careful, we begin focusing on things in the physical realm that make us feel better, and eventually spirituality is measured in terms of externals.

12. The Word Our Authority

Let me state again that if you feel guilty before God about what you are doing, you are in sin whether the Word of God speaks to the issue or not. That is a personal issue with you. Also, if the Word of God speaks to an issue, there is nothing to be discussed. That is the final authority whether I like it or not.

The Word of God must be our authority. It does not matter if we change how we conduct our services, but the Word of God must be at the heart of what we do because it provides the nourishment for growing. The Word is clear that whatever we do must be done decently and in order. There are certain basics which must be included, but beyond that, other things are up for grabs. As long as we honor the Word of God and are submissive to the Lord, these other things are flexible.

In ministry to other people, the Word of God is the issue of prime importance. Your church may teach that to get to heaven you must be baptized, confirmed, keep the Sabbath and do the best you can. But those things are traditions. The Word of God says that you must recognize that you are a sinner, believe that Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins and place your confidence in Him as the One who died in your place. If you trust Him as your Savior, He will cleanse you, forgive you and make you His child. Anything else added to salvation is putting tradition over the Word of God. Such traditions are vain, worthless and accomplish nothing.

The Word of God sets us free. Men want to put us in chains again. They want to tie us up and put us into bondage. Paul asks why we should want to go back to bondage when Jesus Christ has set us free. We are free to be everything He wants us to be. That is the kind of freedom and liberty we have in Christ.