

## **Christ and His Law**

### **Christ and Religious Tradition**

Lesson #3 for April 19, 2014

Scriptures: Matthew 5:17-20; 15:1-6; 23:1-7; Isaiah 29:13; Romans 10:3.

1. This lesson is a discussion of the role that tradition should—or should not—play in our religious practice. As used in the Bible, *tradition* simply means that which is handed down.
2. John Wesley who founded the Methodist Church suggested that one's theology is influenced by four factors: faith, reason, Scripture, and tradition. What do you think should be the role of each of these factors in your religion? Protestants have often decried tradition.
3. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded by a group of young people who spent many hours reading, studying, and debating Scripture to determine what their—and our—list of beliefs should include. Review the Sabbath conferences in early Adventism. Unfortunately, many modern theologians, scholars, and even people in the pew have come to think that reason, tradition, and personal opinion play a much larger role in their theology. Traditions are like habits. Why do you think it is that many churches including ours seem to be drifting away from careful, detailed study of Scripture in determining what our beliefs should be?
4. At the foot of Mount Sinai, God gave the children of Israel not only the writings of Moses but also added to them a number of detailed practices that they were supposed to follow as a part of their worship of Him. Those practices were designed to teach certain basic and very important theological ideas. About 500 years later, David gathered materials for the temple in Jerusalem which ultimately was built by his son Solomon. The Jews came to believe that their entire religious experience was based on what happened at that temple.
5. Since most of the Israelites lived some distance away from the temple, it was easy for them to gradually adopt the religious practices of the pagan groups around them instead of remaining faithful to God's directions. (See Judges 19-21.)
6. Levites were scattered around the country in small cities. They were supposed to be teaching and directing the worship of God. But, as their worship experience deteriorated and more and more pagan fertility cult practices became a part of their lives, almost the only thing that connected them with the true God was the temple in Jerusalem. They came to believe that nothing could happen to that temple. (Jeremiah 7:1-3) They believed that as long as they stayed close to the temple, they would be safe. Obviously, that proved not to be true.
7. After the Babylonian exile, the rebuilt temple was much smaller and not nearly such an attractive center for their worship. Ezra with the help of Nehemiah and others who followed them began to teach that the center of their worship was supposed be God's Word—the Scriptures—as opposed to a building in a certain place. Those scholars not only arranged for the copying of the Bible and the reading and studying of it (see Nehemiah 8) but also eventually came to be the interpreters of Scripture since the people no longer spoke or read Hebrew. In fact, very few people could read either Hebrew or Aramaic. And the common language with which they had come back from Babylon was Aramaic which is related to Hebrew but, nevertheless, was significantly different.
8. Quite naturally, those who could read Hebrew and became Bible scholars thought that it was their job to interpret the Scriptures for the general populace. A great oral tradition developed which came to be known as the teachings of the Great Synagogue.
9. When the Greeks began to rule the world, they had the idea that everyone in the world should adopt Greek culture and become Greek. This set up the great conflict in the thinking of Jewish people as to whether they should adopt those new customs or remain faithful to their old customs. Around the year 167 B.C., the Maccabean Revolt was a response to

imposed religious practices from Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The Maccabees eventually figured out how to drive out the Greeks. During that time, the pious Jewish sect known as the *hasidim* very strongly opposed the influences of Greek culture. The Pharisees were apparently the later remnants of that *hasidim* group.

10. By contrast, the Sadducees—while they controlled the high priesthood and the temple in Jerusalem—felt much more comfortable with Greek culture and ideas. The Essenes who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls believed that even the Pharisees were too liberal.
11. Read Matthew 23:1-7. In Matthew 23, Jesus was pointing out many of the problems connected with their traditional religion. Jesus was telling us to study and think for ourselves.
12. What is the role of tradition in our religion? The Greek word from which we get *tradition* simply means something “handed down.” It ended up being a collection of things that they did and believed that became something like habits. They did not have to think about them; they just did them. Unfortunately, among the Pharisees those traditions gradually became ways to show off their religious superiority. They did almost everything for show. They wanted to be praised. The teachings of the fathers came to have equal or in some cases superior force to the actual commandments of God.
13. Jesus asked them to think about what they were doing! He asked them to go back and carefully look at the Scriptures to determine whether or not they were following God’s guidance. That upset the Pharisees almost from the beginning of His ministry. Starting at least as early as His cleansing of the temple as recorded in John 2, they hated Him and wanted to kill Him. (*Desire of Ages* 164.4; compare Mark 3:1-6) The Pharisees were so determined to do everything exactly according to the letter of their many laws and rules that their name has become almost synonymous with *legalist*. They did not want to tolerate anyone who would raise any questions about their practices.
14. The great Jewish scholars who wanted to help the people understand the Scriptures almost certainly did not intend for their teachings to be raised to equality with the Scriptures themselves. Their teachings were only intended to help people understand. But, eventually, this collection of oral addition became quite fixed; it was known as the *Midrash*.
15. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince) put many of those rules down in a volume which he called the *Mishnah*. The *Mishnah* was a collection of rules spelled out by a variety of rabbis including several who lived at the time of Jesus. Perhaps you have heard of Hillel and Shammai. Gamaliel, the grandson of Hillel and Paul’s teacher, was one of those rabbis.
16. Read Matthew 15:1-6. What is the issue being pointed out? Surely, Jesus was not in favor of uncleanness. Jesus was simply trying to point out that their multitude of minor rules was taking the place of the major rules spelled out in Scripture.
17. Christ was not forbidding groups to establish rules by which to operate. Whenever human beings form communities, they must have mutually agreed upon laws and rules to control their conduct. Do we as Seventh-day Adventists have certain rules, traditions, even customs that we believe help us to live more faithfully and obediently to the law?
18. Take Matthew 15:1-6 as an example of this issue. Can you find a verse in the Old Testament that specifies when and how one should or should not wash his hands? There is no such text in the Old Testament. Compare Mark 7:3-4 and Matthew 15:11.
19. Health professionals in our day might applaud the Pharisees for suggesting that the disciples should wash their hands. But, that discussion was not about physical cleanliness. It was about spiritual defilement. According to the Pharisees, there was the possibility that some contaminating force might have touched those grains of wheat or the disciples hands; and if they ate without proper cleansing, they would be defiled ceremonially!

20. Read Isaiah 29:13. Compare Matthew 15:8-9 and Mark 7:6-7.

The substitution of the precepts of men for the commandments of God has not ceased. Even among Christians are found institutions and usages that have no better foundation than the traditions of the fathers. Such institutions, resting upon mere human authority, have supplanted those of divine appointment. Men cling to their traditions, and revere their customs, and cherish hatred against those who seek to show them their error. . . . In place of the authority of the so-called fathers of the church, God bids us accept the word of the eternal Father, the Lord of heaven and earth.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 398.3-4.

21. In light of Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; Matthew 19:19; and Ephesians 6:2, read Matthew 15:3-6. What serious charge did Jesus make in those verses against the Pharisees? In this passage Jesus condemned them for setting up their man-made rules in opposition to or in superiority to God's rules in the Scriptures.

22. The Pharisees taught that there were 613 different laws recorded in the books of Moses. Is it possible that those 613 laws were all harmonious and not contradictory. Try to imagine how the Pharisees felt when Jesus accused them of breaking the rules! They must have been shocked! Is our form of baptism a tradition? Must one be baptized to join the church?

23. Read Matthew 5:17-20. Compare Romans 10:3. The Pharisees were so proud of their rules and so proud of themselves as they pretended to keep them that they fully believed that keeping all of their rules was their ticket to heaven. They seemed to have forgotten Isaiah's warning recorded in Isaiah 64:6 that human righteousness is nothing but filthy rags. J. B. Philips's translation for Romans 10:4 summarizes their problem quite well: "For Christ means the end of the struggle for righteousness-by-the-Law for everyone who believes in him."

24. Are there any rules, customs, or traditions in our church that need to be re-examined and perhaps done away with?

Let all who accept human authority, the customs of the church, or the traditions of the fathers, take heed to the warning conveyed in the words of Christ, "In vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 398.4.

25. Do we have a clear sense of which rules are God-and-Scripture-based and which rules are merely human ideas?

Believers have not infrequently allowed the enemy to work through them at the very time when they should have been wholly consecrated to God and to the advancement of His work. **Unconsciously they have wandered far from the way of righteousness. Cherishing a spirit of criticism and faultfinding, of pharisaical piety and pride, they have grieved away the Spirit of God and have greatly retarded the work of God's messengers.**—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 125.

26. Do you think it is possible that some in your church community are unconsciously "wandering far from the way of righteousness"?

27. One obvious set of customs and conditions that our church has espoused is the order and content of Sabbath school classes. Would it be all right to change things in the way we do Sabbath school—at least once in a while using the entire period for discussion?

28. Think through the ways in which the Pharisees developed their rules. Do you think the original people who came up with those Pharisaical rules intended for them to be treated as equal with God's rules? Almost certainly not. So, why was Jesus so critical of their Pharisaical rules? He had the ability to very clearly distinguish between what was of God's

origin and what was of merely human origin.

29. It might be useful to think of a young child unwrapping a Christmas present. Often, the child will become so enamored with playing with the wrapping that he is more interested in the wrapping than he is in the gift which is inside! As Jesus tried to strip away the human rules that were so oppressive in His day, many today believe that He was actually doing away with the law itself. How would you explain to someone from a different religious background why that is not true? Could you provide Scripture passages to support your views?
30. The Pharisees spent an enormous amount of time trying to avoid spiritual contamination. Could you define spiritual contamination? Read Matthew 15:10-20. Are there any teachings in our Sabbath schools and even in our church services that might come under the title of spiritual contamination?
31. Jesus apparently worked tirelessly to break down some of the inhibitions that His disciples and other Jews had come to believe. Considering their attitudes and practices up to the time of His crucifixion, it might seem like He had little success. But, following the crucifixion and following the experiences at Pentecost, things changed. What was it that made things change at that point? How did the early Christian church break down prejudices against associating with Gentiles, for example?
32. Let us be honest in recognizing that in the early days following Pentecost, the Christians met at the temple and in the homes of various Christians almost every day. They did not seem to have any interest in spreading the gospel outside of Judaism.
33. But after the crucifixion, realizing what the Pharisees and Sadducees had done to Jesus gave the disciples a new boldness in facing their own religious leaders. See Acts 4:8-13. They were beginning to throw out their almost sacred reverence for the Jewish leaders. They spoke the message of the risen Christ with boldness. (Acts 4:31)
34. Eventually, Philip traveled to Samaria and began to evangelize Samaritans. Later, he baptized an Ethiopian government official. (Acts 8:26-39) Eventually, Philip ended up preaching in Caesarea Maritima. (Acts 21:8-9)
35. The famous story of Peter and Cornelius the Roman centurion in Acts 10 and 11 was a big push in the right direction. But, Peter still had things to learn about associating with Gentiles. (Galatians 2:11-14)
36. As problematic as were the Pharisees in the ministry of Jesus, it is interesting to notice that a large number of them eventually became Christians. (Acts 15:5) Even some of the priests became Christians! (Acts 6:7)
37. How many of us have barriers that prevent us from reaching out to members of other congregations and other religious groups around us? Do we dare to enter into conversation with atheists and evolutionists? How can we be certain that we will not be more influenced by their ideas than they are by ours?
38. What would you do if you were suddenly placed in a small town or even a village away from other Seventh-day Adventists? Do you think you would be able to convince others to become Seventh-day Adventists? We will never be able to finish the gospel unless we can learn to speak up with confidence and assurance about the God we love. When will we start practicing that?

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