

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 76** and ask **Question #1: What are some social customs you were taught to follow?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life** on **PSG, page 77**, and share the author's illustration about oil with its benefits and problems. Note how he compares this to traditions, which also have both benefits and problems.

SAY: "Today we will look at some religious traditions and social customs Jesus addressed that led to hypocrisy in Jewish religious leaders."

Reinforce **The Point** on **PSG page 77: Jesus calls us to a higher standard.**

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask God to help us to see how our traditions and personal preferences can cause us to be out of alignment with His intentions for how we are to live.

SESSION 7

JESUS CORRECTS



The Point

Jesus calls us to a higher standard.

The Bible Meets Life

Our world is full of many "brands" of Christianity, because individuals and groups pick and choose the parts of the Bible they want to follow or interpret in their own way. Biblical Christianity, though, is just

that—biblical—and calls us to obey the whole of Scripture. Jesus calls us to a higher standard, a standard not grounded in ourselves, but grounded in His loving commands meant to transform us from the inside out.

The Passage

Mark 7:5-15

The Setting

After feeding the multitude, Jesus sent His disciples back across the lake while He stayed behind to pray. Jesus again demonstrated His authority over nature by walking on water (Mark 6:45-52). Mark recorded that Jesus continued His ministry of teaching and healing in the region of Gennesaret (vv. 53-56). During this time, a conflict arose between Jesus and some of Israel's religious leaders concerning ceremonial purification.

Mark 7:5-8

5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders, instead of eating bread with ceremonially unclean hands?”

6 He answered them, “Isaiah prophesied correctly about you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

7 They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands.

8 Abandoning the command of God, you hold on to human tradition.”

1 ▶ **Verse 5.** Jesus had ongoing debates and conflicts with the religious leaders of His day. Often, the thorn of contention rested in the difference between how He and the religious leaders interpreted the law. In this particular instance, His dispute was with the Pharisees and the scribes. The Pharisees were the largest Jewish religious sect in first-century Israel. They were a conservative group that controlled the synagogue system and had a great deal of influence over the population at large. “They were the developers of the oral tradition, the teachers of the two-fold law: written and oral. They saw the way to God as being through obedience to the law... The Pharisees opposed Jesus because He refused to accept their interpretations of the oral law.”¹

The scribes were considered to be experts in the law. In Jesus’ day, their responsibilities included interpreting the law, teaching the law to disciples, and offering their expertise in situations where people were accused of having broken the law. Most of the scribes were associated with the Pharisees.²

Sometimes, these religious leaders would argue with Jesus about the manner in which He or His disciples observed—or, from their perspective, failed to properly observe—the Sabbath (Mark 2:24). At other times, like this instance, they would challenge Him over His and/or His disciples’ failure to keep various parts of **the tradition of the elders**, which was “the oral, scribal interpretation of the written, Mosaic law.”³

One “tradition of the elders” was a hand-washing ceremony that took place before meals (7:1-4). While we tend to think of washing our hands before eating as a matter of hygiene, the Pharisees believed it was a matter of holiness—and it had to

STUDY THE BIBLE

Mark 7:5-8



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 78.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Mark 7:5-8.

GUIDE: Refer to **PSG pages 78-79**, that explains how the rabbis and the Pharisees supplemented the Torah with additions that made keeping the law burdensome. Point out the example of the prohibition against work on the Sabbath.

SAY: “The original intent of the Sabbath—resting and re-focusing on the Creator—was replaced with a legalistic set of rules that went far beyond the purpose of the command.”

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** to provide further explanation to the oral tradition or the “tradition of the elders.” Explain the hand washing ceremony in verse 5.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 79**, to the explanation of the term *hypocrites*.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 2** to provide further explanation on the term *hypocrites*. Also share insights about Isaiah 29:13 that Jesus quoted.

SAY: "In their zeal to protect the Law of Moses, the scribes and Pharisees had compiled a vast numbers of oral laws to ensure that the written law was kept. While their original intentions may have been noble ... in their teaching, they elevated their oral laws (human commands) to the same level of authority as God's written law."

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 3** on **page 81** to show how the scribes and Pharisees raised "holding on to human tradition" over the command of God. Share background information about the Jewish *Mishna*.

be done just right. The Pharisees prescribed the exact manner in which this was to be done—and accused Jesus' disciples of failing to keep this tradition. While the Pharisees and scribes asked about His disciples' failure to keep the tradition of the elders, their real intended target was Jesus Himself. Their assumption was that any rabbi who knowingly allowed his disciples to break the oral traditions really wasn't qualified to be a rabbi. They were using this question to raise doubts about Jesus' authority and credibility as a religious teacher. ◀

2 ▶ Verses 6-7. Jesus turned the tables on the scribes and Pharisees by challenging their interpretation of what the law was really all about. He labeled them as **hypocrites**. The Greek term for "hypocrites" originally referred to an actor who would wear various masks during a play. Jesus accused the religious leaders of having a veneer of piety (honoring God **with their lips**), but lacking true devotion to God (**their heart is far from me**). On another occasion, Jesus denounced the religious leaders for their practice of seeking public attention through their giving and praying (Matt. 6:1-8), but failing to nurture a closer relationship with God. The same was true with their practice of fasting (vv. 16-18). In each of these areas, their "faith" was all for show.

Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13, in which God condemned the people of Judah for their false worship. In Isaiah's time, the people of Judah had viewed their participation in the formal rituals of the temple in Jerusalem as acts of worship. However, these outward practices were merely superficial. Similarly, the **worship** of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day was also **in vain**. Their external piety did not reflect the true condition of their hearts, which were far from God.

In their zeal to protect the Law of Moses, the scribes and Pharisees had compiled a vast numbers of oral laws to ensure that the written law was kept. While their original intentions may have been noble, in the process the scribes and Pharisees had fallen in love with the idea of keeping the law (both oral and written), rather than with the One who gave them the written law to begin with. In their teaching, they elevated their oral laws (**human commands**) to the same level of authority as God's written law. ◀

Unfortunately, the scribes and Pharisees spread their poisonous beliefs and practices to those who followed them. In another stinging rebuke recorded in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus proclaimed, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in

people's faces. For you don't go in, and you don't allow those entering to go in" (Matt. 23:13). Jesus observed that the scribes and Pharisees expended great effort in converting a person, but in the process they "make him twice as fit for hell" as the religious leaders were themselves (Matt. 23:15).

3 ▶ **Verse 8.** The scribes and Pharisees fell into the category of holding on to **human tradition**. In their zeal to protect **the command of God** (the written law of the Old Testament), they created the body of oral interpretations of and teachings about the written law. In the process, they abandoned God's law in favor of their traditions. This elevation of the traditions of their oral law eventually placed the oral law in a higher position of authority than the Word of God! "The *Mishna*, a collection of Jewish traditions in the Talmud, records, 'It is a greater offense to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbis than to contradict Scripture itself.'"⁴ Although the *Mishna* was compiled almost two centuries (AD 220) after Jesus' interaction with the scribes and Pharisees, this quotation from the *Mishna* is reflective of the attitude of the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day. Somewhere along the way, the religious leaders had lost sight of what really mattered.

Jesus emphasized that genuine worship is a matter of the heart, not mere obedience to a list of rules or traditions. It is about a relationship with God, not a book of regulations. ◀

Mark 7:9-13

9 He also said to them, "You have a fine way of invalidating God's command in order to set up your tradition!

10 For Moses said: Honor your father and your mother; and Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death.

11 But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or mother: Whatever benefit you might have received from me is corban' " (that is, an offering devoted to God),

12 "you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.

13 You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many other similar things."

DISCUSS: Question #2
(PSG, p. 79): **When do believers concern themselves more with external issues than internal issues?**

(Alternate: Where do you see man-made traditions adversely influencing the church today?)

TRANSITION: "In the next verses, Jesus turned the tables on the religious leaders by giving them a specific example of how they were invalidating God's command in order to keep human traditions that were beneficial to them."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Mark 7:9-13



10 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Mark 7:9-13.

GUIDE: Highlight Jesus' teachings on **PSG page 80**. The Law clearly commands:

1. "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12).
2. "Whoever curses his father or his mother must be put to death" (21:17).

The religious leaders created a human tradition: the rabbinical practice of "corban." *Corban* referred to a gift dedicated to God; it was a serious vow in which a person devoted property or money to God. It couldn't be given to anyone else.

SAY: "Some people apparently used this vow to avoid providing assistance to their parents. These individuals had found a "loophole" in the corban vow that allowed them to keep the property or money they vowed as corban and not help their parents."

Verse 9. Jesus continued His scathing rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees. "**You have a fine way of invalidating God's command in order to set up your tradition!**" By giving the traditions of the elders precedence over the Word of God, the religious leaders had invalidated the Scriptures. They had robbed them of their power and credibility. The people no longer turned to God for answers. They were too busy trying to keep all the rules they had been given by the scribes and Pharisees.

The Greek term translated **invalidating** has the idea of setting something aside or forsaking something. The Scriptures were put aside (where they were essentially forgotten or abandoned) in favor of the traditions of the elders. This allowed the Pharisees and scribes to practice a kind of obedience that really was not obedience at all. They felt the "freedom" to pick and choose what they liked and what they could ignore. Jesus "showed them that they used God's Word like a wheelbarrow—they pushed it wherever they wanted it to go."⁵

In His message through the prophet Malachi, God took the priests serving in the temple of Jerusalem to task for similar violations. They had been offering sacrifices, but those sacrifices were not in accordance with the standard God required. Yet the priests still expected God's favor. As a result, God said, "I wish one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would no longer kindle a useless fire on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD of Armies, "and I will accept no offering from your hands" (Mal. 1:10). In God's eyes, when worship becomes this distorted, it is better to have no worship at all. The priests of Malachi's time—approximately 450 years before Jesus—had not been faithful to God. They had rejected His authority and led many astray as a result (2:1-9). The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day had done the same.

Verse 10. Jesus backed up His accusation of the scribes and Pharisees' hypocrisy with a concrete example from God's Word. Jesus actually combined two quotes from the Old Testament: specifically from the laws God gave to Moses. The first quote comes from the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12 and its parallel in Deut. 5:16), where God requires respect for parents. The command comes with a blessing for those who obey it—they will enjoy a long life and peace. While today we often think of this verse in the context of young children or teenagers obeying their parents, the law

sets no limits. Every person—regardless of age—was (and is) expected to honor his or her parents.

The second quotation is from Exodus 21:17, which detailed what was to happen to those who ignored the commandment to honor their parents. Rather than enjoying blessing, those who spoke evil of their parents were to be put to death. A similar command is recorded in Leviticus 20:9, and Proverbs 20:20 affirms that those who refuse to honor their parents would suffer for their rebellion.

Verses 11-12. The Word of God clearly stated that those who honored their parents were blessed and those who did not were cursed—and faced capital punishment. After quoting Scripture, Jesus set up a comparison between God’s Word and the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees with His words, **“But you say.”** He did this to point out the contradiction between the two. Jesus showed how the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees not only violated the Word of God, but encouraged people to show contempt for their parents.

4 ▶ The term **corban** (Greek *korban*) comes from a Hebrew word (*gorban*) meaning **an offering devoted to God**. (Mark’s original readers would have spoken and read Greek, Mark defined the word for them.) The practice of declaring something as “corban” meant that item (either money or property) was dedicated to God’s use and could not be used for secular purposes. Some people apparently used this vow to avoid providing assistance to their parents. These individuals had found a “loophole” in the corban vow that allowed them to keep the property or money they vowed as corban instead of giving it to the temple. While the money or property was supposedly dedicated to God, the person who made the vow could still use the item(s) dedicated by the vow for his own personal use. However, the item(s) could not be given to someone else—including his parents. At the person’s death, the remaining portion of the property or money would be given to God (via donation to the temple).

According to the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, the corban vow was irrevocable. If at some future point, the person decided he would like to use the money or items he had dedicated to God to help his parents, the religious leaders would refuse to annul his vow. The Pharisees and scribes used the passage of Numbers 30:1-10 as the basis for their refusal, holding that vows to God overruled any other obligation or commitment, including to one’s parents.⁶ ◀

5 ▶ **Verse 13.** Jesus summarized His argument by returning to His original point. **“You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”** “Jesus

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 4** to provide more background on the human tradition of *corban*.

- *The person who made the vow could still use the item(s) dedicated by the vow for his own personal use.*
- *The item(s) could not be given to someone else—including his parents.*
- *According to the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, the corban vow was irrevocable.*
- *The scribes and Pharisees held that vows to God overruled any other obligation or commitment, including to one’s parents (Numbers 30:1-10).“*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 5** on this page and page 84 to bring to full circle Jesus words how the religious leaders invalidated God’s command (verse 9) or nullified the word of God by prioritizing human tradition over the law.

DISCUSS: Question #3
(PSG, p. 81): **What drives people to twist God's commands to their own advantage?**

(Alternate: *What steps can we take to identify and honor the intent of God's commands?*)

TRANSITION: "After addressing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, Jesus turned to the crowd (and to us) and implored them (and us) to listen and understand His words."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Mark 7:14-15



15 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Mark 7:14-15.

categorically rejected the practice of using one biblical text to negate another. He showed how we can make the Bible say whatever we want if we do not take the time to understand the spirit and purpose of the law."⁷

Through their traditions (their faulty interpretation of God's Word), the scribes and Pharisees were denying the authority of the Word of God. The legalistic nature of the scribes and Pharisees was doing more spiritual harm than good. They had taken the law as it was designed by God and distorted it for their own purposes. Jesus words, "**And you do many other similar things,**" indicates that His one example of the religious leaders' distortion of Scripture was not an isolated occurrence, but an ongoing practice.

It might be tempting to criticize the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy. But we must be careful to avoid the same trap. While we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone, many believers still wrestle with the temptation of maintaining a devotion to rules in place of nurturing their relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The rules are still a useful guide, but they are not the source of our salvation. ◀

Mark 7:14-15

14 Summoning the crowd again, he told them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand:

15 Nothing that goes into a person from outside can defile him but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."

Verse 14. Having dealt with the scribes and Pharisees—at least for the time being—Jesus turned His attention back to **the crowd**. He challenged them to **listen** and to **understand**. In essence, these two commands are parallel to one another. Jesus often encouraged His audience to listen, but He was never really talking about just using their ears to hear. He was focused on their hearts, which is where understanding that leads to spiritual transformation begins.

Jesus also indicated He was speaking to everyone in the crowd with the phrase "**all of you.**" No one was exempt from the basic lesson He was about to teach. Everyone

present needed to hear it and understand it. Jesus was about to correct some misconceptions related to the scribes and Pharisees' original question (Mark 7:5). He would educate the crowd concerning the true nature of purity and righteousness.

6 ▶ Verse 15. In their initial attack, the scribes and Pharisees had questioned Jesus about the actions of His disciples regarding their failure to keep the ritual law about washing one's hands before a meal. According to the religious ideas of the day, everything an unclean person touched became unclean. So, a person who didn't observe the ceremonial cleansing law tainted everything (and everyone) around him. Given that, such an individual should not have been allowed to take part in the meal.

But Jesus provided a different take on what defiles a person and what makes a person clean. The key to purity rests in the condition of a person's heart. The things that go into us—the things we eat—have no moral power over us. Later Jesus pointed out to His disciples that what we consume simply passes through the digestive system and is eliminated (vv. 18-19). "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of people's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immoralities, thefts, murders, adulteries, greed, evil actions, deceit, self-indulgence, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a person" (vv. 20-23). It is the things that come out of us—the things that originate in our hearts—that are the true measure of our spiritual condition. Evil thoughts, actions, and words are born and bred inside of us. James told his readers that sin occurs when people fall into temptation, then allow it to grow in their hearts until it turns into action (Jas. 1:14-15).

Jeremiah called the human heart "more deceitful than anything else" (Jer. 17:9). We have nothing perfectly good and pure in ourselves, but Christ gives us His righteousness when we trust in Him (Rom. 5:15-21; Phil. 3:8-9). The only way we can cultivate such goodness in our lives is through the work of Christ in our hearts and minds (Rom. 8:1-13; Gal. 5:16-25). God expects His children to live godly lives. But we don't strive to live godly lives in order *to be saved*—we are saved through grace by faith in Jesus alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Rather, we strive to live godly lives because *we have been saved*—it is the "fruit" of our salvation (Gal. 5:22-25; Eph. 2:10; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). It all depends on Jesus because He changes everything! ◀

1. Clayton Harrop and Charles W. Draper, "Jewish Parties in the New Testament" in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, and Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 917.

2. "Scribe" in *ibid.*, 1452.

3. James A. Brooks, *Mark*, vol. 23 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 115.

4. Rodney L. Cooper, *Mark*, vol. 2 in *Holman New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 117.

5. *Ibid.*, 117-118.

6. *Ibid.*, 118.

7. *Ibid.*

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 6** to show

how Jesus went back to the beginning of the conversation about unclean hands. He taught that what defiles a person is not what goes into them from the outside, but that which is within. The heart is where defilement originates.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **DIGGING DEEPER** on **PSG page 82** for more background about *defilement*.

DISCUSS: Question #4
(PSG, p. 83): **How can we make sure our hearts are pure as opposed to appearing to be pure?**

DISCUSS: Question #5
(PSG, p. 84): **What steps can we take to demonstrate grace rather than legalism?**

(Alternate: *What are the implications of Jesus' declaration in verse 15 for those who follow Him?*)

DO: Encourage group members to complete the activity "**Tradition**" on **PSG page 84**.

LIVE IT OUT**5 minutes**

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:** **Jesus calls us to a higher standard.**

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out (PSG, p. 85)**; (see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

GUIDE: Remind group members that the source of what makes us impure is what is in our hearts and minds. Jeremiah 17:9 says that “the heart is more deceitful than anything else.”

PRAY: “Father, create clean hearts for us (Ps. 51:10). Remove any semblance of hypocrisy from us as we determine to follow You and be obedient to Your Word.”

LIVE IT OUT

Sometimes it’s difficult to acknowledge that our traditions or preferences can be a hindrance to others in their walk with Christ. Take time this week to:

- ▶ **Dig.** Identify some of the “church traditions” you grew up with or currently practice. Divide them into three groups: rituals, preferences, and Bible-centered practices.
- ▶ **Bury.** Stand strong for Christ-centered practices, but let go of those things that are just your preferences. Determine not to expect others to live according to your preferences.
- ▶ **Plant.** Take someone out for coffee this week who is struggling with their faith because of the practices or customs they experienced in a particular church. Share your story. Help them see that a relationship with God is not tied to these practices but to faith in Christ.



BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



Mattathias Antigonus (Mattityah) coin.
Obverse: cornucopia, Hebrew inscription:
Mattityah the High Priest.

Leviticus 11:3-23 and Deuteronomy 14:4-20 provide descriptions of the “clean” animals the Israelites could eat and the “unclean” animals they were forbidden to eat. The animals were considered unclean because they defiled the eater. An Israelite who ate one of the unclean animals became ritually unclean until evening (Lev. 11:25,27,31).

Jesus kept God’s law perfectly. He affirmed that His purpose was not to destroy the law but to fulfill it. Mark recorded some of Jesus’ responses to the Pharisees and scribes (Mark 7:6-13). Jesus used a quotation from the prophecy of

Isaiah (29:13 and the saying about “Corban” to rebuke the Jewish leaders for regarding the tradition of the elders more highly than God’s law.

Jesus then turned to the multitude and made a startling proclamation to them. He said, “Hear me, all, and understand. There is nothing from outside of the man entering into him that is able to defile him, but the things coming out of the man are the things that are defiling the man” (Mark 7:14-15).

In verse 19, Mark said that Jesus was “declaring clean all foods.” Mark concluded that Jesus meant all foods are clean and therefore permissible for all to eat. The Pharisees and scribes focused on keeping the letter of the law to avoid the defilement they felt could come to them from the outside. Jesus taught that defilement comes from the heart and is not affected by outward things.

The excerpt above is from the article “Food and Defilement” (Winter 1995), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus often corrected those who relied upon religion instead of a relationship with God. His stern rebuke is intended to lead us to repentance and faith in Him.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, “Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All,” on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.

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Free additional ideas for your group are available at
BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra