The Point
Jesus calls us to a higher standard.

The Passage
Mark 7:5-15

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 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 7:5-15 (CSB)

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.”

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.”

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.”
Jesus calls us to a higher standard.

GET INTO THE STUDY

DISCUSS: Invite your group members to discuss Question #1 on page 61 of the PSG (Personal Study Guide): “What are some social customs or traditions you were taught to follow?” Allow time for each person to respond.

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 62): Oil plays an important part in our lives and our economy. Just try driving your car this week without oil and gas in your car.

While oil serves us well, it can also be the source of great problems. The worst accidental oil spill in the world occurred in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico when the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded. Over 200 million gallons of oil coated 572 miles of beaches and wildlife. Marine life was killed, and hundreds of birds became coated with the thick oil and died.2

Traditions are like oil. Both are good, but we don’t want them coating things they have no business coating. Sometimes we can let traditions and social customs coat and choke out other areas of life. Many religious traditions have value, but when they cover up and hide the commands and the grace of God, it’s like an oil spill in our hearts.

SAY: “Just as clean-up crews work swiftly to clean up an environmental disaster, Jesus stepped in with the gospel. He rebuked and corrected the thinking of the religious leaders, whose traditions created a spiritual disaster.”

GUIDE: Call attention to The Point on page 62 of the PSG: “Jesus calls us to a higher standard.”

PRAY: Transition into the discussion with prayer.

TIP: Encourage your group members to participate in church-wide activities outside of your Bible study time. Make plans to go as a group to the next church fellowship or serve together at mission opportunities.

PACK POSTER:
Pack Item #1 “Jesus Changes Everything” poster

PLAYLIST PICK:
“Forgiven” By Crowder
Mark 7:5-8 (CSB)

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.”

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Mark 7:5-8.

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGES 63-64): The first portion of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, held a special place in the hearts of the Jewish people. In the Torah, God provided the prescription for how His people were to live. It contains the Books of Genesis through Deuteronomy, and is referenced in other parts of the Old Testament simply as “the Law.”

As rabbis taught the Torah, many saw fit to supplement it with additions. These additions could be simple things like insights and comments on certain passages. At other times, the rabbis would add more laws around the ones God gave so that they would be sure not to violate one of His commands.

The Jews had no stricter enforcers of these added rules and regulations than the Pharisees. So when they saw Jesus’ disciples “eating bread with ceremonially unclean hands,” (v. 5) they were quick to point it out to Jesus. Their intent was not to correct an error but to discredit Jesus.

Jesus, of course, saw the motivation of their hearts. By external appearances, these Pharisees demonstrated a deeply religious role. But their hearts were dark and prideful. In their prideful zeal to keep their own oral traditions, the Pharisees neglected the true purpose and intent of God’s commands.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 63 of the PSG: “What are some factors that cause modern Christians to neglect God’s commands?”

TRANSITION: These verses teach about the danger of neglecting the commands of God. The next verses give another warning: we’re not to twist His commands to meet our own needs.
**Mark 7:5-8 Commentary**

**Verse 5:** Throughout His ministry, Jesus had an ongoing series of debates and conflicts with the religious leaders of His day. In this particular instance, His dispute was with the Pharisees and scribes. The Pharisees “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 this case, the Pharisees and scribes challenged Jesus over His disciples’ failure to keep part of the tradition of the elders, which was “the oral, scribal interpretation of the written, Mosaic law.”2 One “tradition of the elders” was a hand-washing ceremony that took place before meals (7:1-4). The Pharisees viewed this practice not just as a matter of hygiene, but as a matter of holiness. The Pharisees prescribed the exact manner in which this was to be done—and accused Jesus’ disciples of failing to keep this tradition. In questioning the behavior of His disciples, the scribes and Pharisees were attempting to raise doubts about Jesus’ authority and credibility as a religious teacher.

**Verses 6-7:** Jesus challenged the scribes and Pharisees’ interpretation of what the law was really all about. He labeled them as hypocrites. Jesus accused them of having a veneer of piety (honoring God “with their lips”), but lacking true devotion to God (“their heart is far from me”). Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13, in which God condemned the people of Judah for their false worship. Their outward practices were merely superficial. Similarly, the worship of the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day was also in vain.

In their zeal to protect the law of Moses, the scribes and Pharisees had compiled a vast number 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.

**Verse 8:** The scribes and Pharisees certainly fell into the category of holding on to “human tradition.” In the process of creating oral interpretations of and teachings, they abandoned God’s law in favor of their traditions. This elevation of the traditions of their oral law over time eventually placed the oral law in a higher position of authority than the Word of God!3

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Mark 7:9-13 (CSB)

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.”

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Mark 7:9-13.

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGES 64-65): The Pharisees had hoped to discredit Jesus, but Jesus turned the tables on them and showed how they twisted God’s Word. To understand how the religious leaders twisted the command to honor our parents (Exodus 20:12; 21:17), let’s look at 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.

» In order to appear righteous, a Pharisee might declare everything he had as corban—designated for use by God. But he might not give it to God at that very moment—he could still use it for himself!—but he essentially put it on reserve for future use in the temple.

» The Pharisees used this practice as a loophole to skirt obligations they had to other people, including the command to honor their parents. For example, when a parent needed financial help, a Pharisee might say that he could not help because his wealth was already devoted to God.

SAY: “By twisting the meaning of the Scripture, Jesus said the Pharisees were nullifying the word of God. To nullify something renders it useless.”

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 65 of the PSG: “What sorts of things might tempt people to twist God’s commands?”

TRANSITION: The next verses highlight the focus of Jesus’ teaching: purity and righteousness begins in our heart.
Mark 7:9-13 Commentary

Verses 9-10: Jesus continued His scathing rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees. Then, He backed up His accusation with a concrete example from God’s Word. The first quote comes from the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:12 and its parallel in Deuteronomy 5:16), where God requires respect for 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 (see also Leviticus 20:9; and Proverbs 20:20).

Verses 11-12: After quoting Scripture, Jesus set up a comparison between God’s Word and the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees (“But you say…”) 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.

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.4

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 doesn’t stop there. “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 part of an ongoing practice.

4. Ibid., 118.
Mark 7:14-15 (CSB)

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.”

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Mark 7:14-15.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 66 of the PSG: “How would you summarize Jesus’ teaching in verses 14-15?”

SUMMARIZE THE PSG (PAGE 66): This whole conversation began when the religious leaders had confronted Jesus because His disciples had dirty hands. Jesus turned it around, showing that these same Pharisees and scribes had dirty hearts.

» Essentially, the Pharisees were taking measures to appear clean on the outside, but they remained defiled on the inside.

» Outward practices such as rituals and ceremonies cannot cleanse us on the inside. Sin comes from what is already residing in our hearts—and that calls for an inward, spiritual solution. Only Jesus can forgive our sin. When we confess our sin and ask Jesus for forgiveness, He does just that.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 67 of the PSG: “How does this passage reveal the difference between the teachings of Jesus and ‘religious’ behavior?”

SAY: “We can do things that look good or religious, but only Christ transforms our hearts. He makes us righteous in Him.”

DO: Instruct group members to complete the activity on page 67 on their own. If time allows, invite volunteers to share their responses aloud.

IN CHRIST ALONE: When you think about 2 Corinthians 5:21, what captures your attention? Describe, list, or sketch your response below.

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): Text a link of the song “Forgiven” by Crowder to your group members. Invite them to listen to this song this week as they spend time in personal worship.
Mark 7:14-15 Commentary

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. As noted in an earlier session (see Session 2 commentary on Mark 4:2b), 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.

Verse 15: In their initial attack, the scribes and Pharisees had questioned Jesus about the actions of His disciples—and, by inference, Jesus Himself—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—and correct—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 in private, Jesus pointed out to His disciples that what we consume simply passes through the digestive system and is eliminated (vv. 18-19). Jesus went on to say, “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. Years later, 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 (James 1:14-15).

The prophet Jeremiah called the human heart “more deceitful than anything else” (Jeremiah 17:9). We have nothing perfectly good and pure in ourselves, but Christ gives us His righteousness when we trust in Him as our Savior (Romans 5:15-21; Philippians 3:8-9). The only way we can cultivate such goodness in our daily lives is through the work of Christ in our hearts and minds (Romans 8:1-13; Galatians 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 (Ephesians 2:8-9). Rather, we strive to live godly lives because we have been saved—it is the “fruit” of our salvation (Galatians 5:22-25; Ephesians 2:10; 2 Peter 1:5-11). It all depends on Jesus because He changes everything!
LIVE IT OUT

SAY: “How will you respond to this passage?”

GUIDE: Lead group members to consider the responses to the Bible study listed on page 68 of the PSG.

» **Evaluate your daily life.** On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being “never” and 10 being “always”), how often are you influenced by religious behaviors instead of Jesus’ teachings? Ask God for wisdom and the ability to focus more on Jesus and His teachings.

» **Commit to study.** The only way to root yourself in Jesus’ truth is to read the Bible regularly. Starting today, spend fifteen minutes reading the Bible. Begin in the Gospel of Mark. Set aside time each day and soon you’ll see a big change in your understanding of Jesus and His teachings.

» **Prioritize God’s Word.** As a group, collect donations to purchase Bibles for the purpose of giving one to guests and new group members who may not have one. This demonstrates the priority your group places on God’s Word and the focus of your gathering.

**Wrap It Up**

SAY: “The Bible has much to say about pollution and corruption that coats our hearts. Unlike an oil spill, you cannot see it, smell it, or measure it. Thankfully, Jesus confronts this kind of corruption and offers us righteousness that’s only found in Him.”

**LEADER PACK:** Bring your group’s attention to Pack Item #1, “Jesus Changes Everything” poster. Invite group members to share what God has taught them through this seven-week study of Jesus’ ministry.

**Get expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid.**
MinistryGrid.com/web/BibleStudiesForLife
FOUR WAYS TO FACILITATE DISCUSSION IN YOUR GROUP

BY MATT MORRIS

We’ve all been there—members of a Bible study group where another group member or the leader dominates the conversation every... single... week. What is your first thought? Boring? I wish this guy would let others talk? Why isn’t he asking questions?

There is a vast difference between group leaders who are facilitators and group leaders who dominate discussion and don’t ask the right questions or do the right things to give others the opportunity to speak up and add value to the conversation.

The reality is group leaders should only talk 30 percent of the time. If you’re a group leader, pause and think about what percentage of time you talk. Do you give the members of your group the opportunity to speak up and answer questions? There are always going to be people in your group who will never speak. Maybe they’re just uncomfortable speaking in front of a
group. But maybe they don’t add to the conversation because there are a few people who always answer questions and give their opinion. Allow me to give you a few tips on how to involve others.

**Be comfortable with silence.** This is important. After you pose a question to your group, wait for twenty seconds. For someone who likes to lead, this can feel like an eternity. But those you lead need time to process what you’ve asked and formulate an answer, and that takes time. Do your best to wait twenty seconds before saying anything.

**Sit next to the person who dominates the conversation.** If there is one group member who is always the first to answer the questions you ask, sit next to them. Chances are that person is less likely to answer if they are sitting right next to you. Not making eye contact with them affords others the opportunity to answer questions as well.

**Talk between meetings.** If allowing for a brief silence and sitting next to the conversation dominator don’t help, talk to that person between meetings. I would suggest you do it away from the small-group environment, whether that’s at a church or in a home. Coffee shops are a great atmosphere. A conversation may go something like this: “Hey, I’m really thankful you’re so responsive when I ask questions in small group, but I want to give others the opportunity to speak up as well. Can you help me with that?”

**Make it a point to involve others.** When posing a question to your group, ask another member what they think or how they interpret the question. “Carolyn, how did you interpret the passage in Mark 7?” “Joel, how does the text we are studying apply directly to your situation right now?”

A couple of resources that may help you as you lead your group are *Field Guide for Small Group Leaders*, by Sam O’Neal, and *Leading Life-Changing Small Groups*, by Bill Donahue. Leaders have a wonderful opportunity to help people become more mature disciples of Christ. Facilitation over domination always needs to be top of mind.

Most of us will agree that daily Bible engagement is important. None of us would raise our hands in front of a group and say we thought otherwise. If daily Bible engagement is so important, then we must intentionally support it.

Here are some ways to encourage your group and group leaders to engage with the Bible daily.

» **Outfit them.** If you were hired to work for a construction company, you would expect the company to provide some of the basic tools needed to do the work. You may want to use your favorite hammer, but there would still be some available if you didn’t have one. The same is true when it comes to Bible study. One thing we can do to encourage daily Bible engagement is to provide group members with the tools needed. We fail them by not outfitting them for success.

» **Show them.** A construction company would never think of sending a new employee out without first showing him or her how to use the tools. As the leader, we need to show our group how to use the resources we provide. If we lead a Bible study group, we may want to dedicate some time occasionally when the group meets to demonstrate how to use the resources provided.

» **Tell them.** Share with group members what you personally are learning in your daily Bible engagement times. Set the standard. Find ways to share an insight you gained or a change you are working on while you are leading the group. Don’t force it or do it every week, but share where it makes sense. Be honest. Let them know your struggles with a passage and with the practice itself. Tell them what you are doing, and how you maintain the habit.

» **Ask them.** Asking for feedback sounds simple, but simple is not always easy. Learn to comfortably ask what group leaders and members are learning through their daily Bible engagement. If everyone is using the same resource, you can initiate a conversation based on one of the suggested readings from that resource. Asking others about what they are learning through their daily Bible engagement gives them permission to ask you what you are learning. Be ready to answer!

» **Involve them.** When leading a Bible study group, invite people to share what they are learning as a result of their daily Bible engagement. If a person mentions an insight gained through daily practice, highlight it and ask him or her to share about the discipline itself. When training new leaders, invite them to share things they have learned that help them maintain the daily discipline of Bible engagement.

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Most every parent has gone through the sweetly annoying stage of questions from their children. These are the days when kids seem to have an inexhaustible curiosity, and the correspondingly inexhaustible list of inquiries to go along with it. The questions range from why the sky is blue, to why certain animals have spots when others don’t, to why we have to eat our vegetables.

The questions come in a flurry during that season of life—one right after the other, until most of the time the parent says that he or she has dispensed enough information for the day.

The reason kids ask these questions, at least in the purest sense, is because they lack information. They are sponges, wanting to soak up every bit of information that we, as the parents, have to give them. They assume that we actually are in possession of all this information, and will freely give it to them.

Parents ask their children questions, too, albeit for different reasons. Sometimes we ask our kids things because we feel distant from them. We want more than anything for our children to open up and share not only about what’s going on in their lives, but also how it makes them feel. So questions for us are not really about information; they’re more about intimacy. And we have such a strong desire for this intimacy that we can ask questions back to our children with the same frequency and intensity they once upon a time employed with us.

The badgered becomes the badgerer.

The same action—asking questions—is employed, but there is a different purpose behind it.

Now consider the fact that God, too, is a question-asker. We see this happen many times in Scripture:

» When Adam and Eve first sinned, God responded with a question: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9).

» When Adam and Eve presented themselves, God asked Eve directly, “What is this you have done?” (Genesis 3:13).

» When God responded to Job’s accusations, He used a series of questions beginning with, “Where were you when I . . . ?” (Job 38:4).

» When Jonah was angry that God did what Jonah feared He would—relent on His punishment of the Ninevites—God asked him twice: “Is it right for you to be angry?” (Jonah 4).

» When the people said Jesus was a prophet or a reincarnation of John the Baptist, He asked the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

The list could go on. In each case, God is asking a question. And because questions serve different purposes, depending on the occasion, we might wonder what God’s intent is in asking these questions.

Well, we know first of all what His intent is not. We know that the question is not informational in nature because God already knows the answer. In fact, God actually knows the facts of every situation better than the people involved in the situation. And here we find one of the great purposes of God in His asking of questions.

God uses questions to force us to confront our own hearts. He questions us not because He needs to know and understand something about what’s going on, but because He wants us to know and understand the truth of what’s going on. Through questions, God forces us to turn our gaze on ourselves—our hearts and our motivations. He makes us look deeply into ourselves, knowing that He already knows, and then own up to
that which we have either been unable or unwilling to see previously.

As He did in the garden, God might ask us, “Where are you?” not because He doesn’t know, but because He wants us to bring into the light the fear and shame that keeps us in hiding.

Or as He did with Jonah, God might force us to confront our own bias, prejudice, and bitterness so that we might, through His compassion and grace, actually move past it.

Or as Jesus did with the disciples, God might ask us again and again who He is—not because He has forgotten—but because He wants us to form the discipline in ourselves of speaking the truth of His character to our doubts over and over again.

This should mean a great deal to us because, as group leaders, questions are one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal. So use them wisely. Don’t neglect them because, just as the Lord does with us, a simple question can wake someone up to a new reality to which they are currently blind.

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