*Christmas Traditions*

Sunday, December 30th

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*Colossians 2:8 New International Version (NIV)*

*“**See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=colossians%202:8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-29503a)*] of this world rather than on Christ.”*

Christmas may be a "holy day" in the mind of men but it is not a “holy day” in the mind of God! The apostle Paul warned the Galatians against celebrating such holy days by saying, (Galatians 4:9-11). Please keep in mind that the Christian community was in force when Paul addressed the Galatian brethren. These people had become converts from Judaism to Christianity, but some were returning to the rites and ceremonies of the Jewish law. The apostle reminds them that these special days, feasts, ceremonies and rites could not impart a single spiritual blessing. In fact, Paul stresses that if they insist upon engaging in practices not authorized by the New Covenant that his labor with them will be considered to have been in vain! Such is also true today when we honor and exalt the traditions of men above the will of God.

Each year at my brother’s annual Christmas night dinner I am asked to give the mealtime blessing. There is generally a mixture of family and unusual friends and this year was no exception, entertaining a couple that now lives in Ireland. I began by going around the room and asking, “What is one of your favorite Christmas memory or tradition.” When it came around to me, I told the story of family gatherings after we had all grown up at my uncle’s house, and he would playback movies downstairs in the basement of past Christmas gatherings when we were children. Now, these would begin in black and white from old film recorded on a handheld video recorder and then taken into a camera store to put on 8mm reels that had to be played back on a video projector. There was no sound, and the film would flicker as if playing in a fast forward motion and break from time to time, having to take breaks and splice the film back together, and as the years went on, they finally moved into color with less hassle, except the bulb would blow. We all take time to laugh at the dresses and the shirts and pants we wore, and the expressions on our faces as children as we opened our gifts. It was always a festive occasion with plenty of food in cramped spaces, holding hands around the room as my uncle would pray. We could always anticipate receiving that one traditional Christmas gift that was soap on a rope from my grandmother. We still chuckle about that to this day. Year after year it became a tradition and we would look forward to the next year until slowly our grandparents and uncles began to slowly age and pass on to heaven’s gate. Over time, traditions change as families grow, marry into new families and then start new traditions of their own. Those were special times. Now we have cell phones with video cameras built into them, and we can play them back on our televisions and computers. Before unpacking today’s message, I’d like to ask two individuals to share a memorable Christmas moment or family tradition. (Wally and Laurie)

Today, I’d like to rewind to the Christian meaning of Ancient Traditions. The word for tradition in the Apostle Paul’s time referred to traditional teaching, especially regulations for the conduct of one’s life that was handed down from one generation to another. By the year AD 360, the church was celebrating the Birth, Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. As the centuries went by, modern traditions were added, such as, the poem “The Night Before Christmas, Santa Clause, Saint Nicholas, and Christmas cards that now exceeds four billion cards sent each year. But over the past month, and as I sat in here and looked around the sanctuary each week, I noticed some Christmas traditions that provide a picture of Christ's coming to a sin-darkened world. First, the trees. In Ancient tradition, the Evergreen trees were the symbol of eternal life. Martin Luther first introduced them to the Reformation Church as a picture of our endless life in Christ, by bringing in a tree to his family on Christmas Eve lit with candles. From Isaiah 60:13, we read, “the glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the pine, and the box tree together, to beautify the place of My sanctuary; and I will make the place of my feet glorious.”

 Maybe some of you put your Christmas tree up on December 24th, but then maybe some of you have a tradition of going to the tree farm and cutting your tree down and putting it up soon after Thanksgiving. The candles are a picture that Christ is the Light of the world and his triumph over sin. Holly speaks of the thorns in Christ’s crown. Red is a color of Christmas that speaks of Christ’s blood and death, and I thought about this each week as we gathered in fellowship and took communion. As I remember watching the films of Christmas past, the gifts are a reminder of the gifts of the Magi to baby Jesus. Each of them speaks to a component of His incarnation: Majesty in life, bitterest agony in death and He as God’s perfect gift to us. Did you know that mistletoe was an ancient symbol from the Roman times? It was under the mistletoe that old hostilities and broken friendships became restored. So Christ was the One who took away the hatred and gave us Peace with God. Romans 5:1, “therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Christmas is the time when the holiday cookies have been a tradition for generations. It amazes me how many different cookies appear each year and recipes exchange hands. But not all human-made traditions of the past have honored God. In Mark 7, Jesus taught about traditions as the Pharisees and scribes confronted Jesus because his disciples did not wash their hands before eating and did not keep the “tradition of the elders.”

Follow along with these words from the Message Bible beginning in Mark 7.

*The Source of Your Pollution*

***7 1-4****The Pharisees, along with some religion scholars who had come from Jerusalem, gathered around him. They noticed that some of his disciples weren’t being careful with ritual washings before meals. The Pharisees—Jews in general, in fact—would never eat a meal without going through the motions of a ritual hand-washing, with an especially vigorous scrubbing if they had just come from the market (to say nothing of the scouring’s they’d give jugs and pots and pans).*

***5****The Pharisees and religion scholars asked, “Why do your disciples flout the rules, showing up at meals without washing their hands?”*

***6-8****Jesus answered, “Isaiah was right about frauds like you, hit the bull’s-eye in fact:*

*These people make a big show of saying the right thing,
    but their heart isn’t in it.
They act like they are worshiping me,
    but they don’t mean it.
They just use me as a cover
    for teaching whatever suits their fancy,
Ditching God’s command
    and taking up the latest fads.”*

As we examine the text, the central conflict is between Jesus and the Pharisees and the idea of “uncleanness.” According to the Old Testament, only priests were required to wash before entering the tabernacle. As Judaism’s encounter with the Gentile culture increased, the question of ritual cleanliness took on new significance as a way of maintaining Jewish purity over against Gentile culture. There is a whole list of violations of ritual uncleanness apart from matters of hygiene or avoiding germs. Mark spells out several types of cleansings in 7:2-5, and the Pharisees recoil from Jesus’ disciples, who eat without washing their hands, which was expected of Jews.

Now, I know what you might be thinking. Why wouldn’t you wash your hands before eating? I hope that you would wash your hands, but the point Mark wants to get across goes much deeper. The Pharisees despised Jesus and his disciples in part because it was only when Jesus as rabbi and prophet intentionally omitted the superstitous custom of washings for the hands, and Jesus rejected the “tradition of men,” because their hearts were far from God. There was a second level of uncleanliness where contact with various unclean things and people deemed heathens would require “baptizing,” or immersion, such as the washing of cups, pitchers, and kettles. Pottery could become polluted because of its porous surface. These were typically objects that were curved or cupped, and that held something within, and they could become unclean. Here it is worth remembering that the obsession with religious ritual purity becomes the contention between Jesus and the Pharisees, a more profound tradition of the elders found in the oral law of the Old Testament. In those days, adherence to the unwritten tradition was just as important to the written rules of the Torah itself.

In general, the Torah, a secret oral tradition which was handed down to Moses at Sinai, was understood as a *policy*. Its commandments declared *what* God decreed, but not always *how* they were to be fulfilled.[[1]](#footnote-1) And so, beginning in verse 6, Jesus sarcastically critiques the traditions of the Pharisees. “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God to observe your traditions.” Jesus refers to them as “hypocrites,” a term meaning someone who acts a role without sincerity, a pretender of sorts. But the point of Jesus goes much further. The quotation from Isaiah 29:13 rightly defines “hypocrite” as one who voices lofty and even noble sentiments that are divorced from the intentions of the heart. The Lord says, People who do this “worship me in vain.” Their teachings are, but rules taught by men and the Pharisees substituted oral tradition for the law itself. It was their commitment to the oral tradition—and Jesus’ equal commitment to recovering the intent of the written law—that made their differences so earnest.[[2]](#footnote-2) And thus in this scene, we see that Jesus saw through the plot of the Pharisees, exposing them for standing in favor of something in place of the Torah, upholding human traditions and rejecting the commandments of God, a voluntary and disobedient human scheme sidestepping the word and will of God.

Back in verse 2, Jesus pronounces that “nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him. Instead, it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean.” Matt 23:25 says this. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.” And so Jesus applies the theory of vessel defilement to persons, as if to say, “if the middle of vessels contaminates them, how much more so the inside of persons? Uncleanness and defilement are matters of intention and the heart, not the violation of cultic rituals and formalities.

Mark understands Jesus by explaining that the Pharisees added hundreds of their own rules and regulations to God’s holy laws, and then tried to force people to follow these rules. The approach of the Pharisees leached the law of its intended purpose and resulted in attempts to establish human substitutes for divine judgment and grace. Jesus, on the contrary, is able to declare what is pleasing to God and condemned their practice that they were guilty of cancelling out God’s word through their tradition. Uncleanness can no longer be considered a property of objects but rather a description of inner attitudes, a condition of the heart and Mark profiles Jesus as the one who, in contrast to the oral tradition, is the true revealer of God, for Jesus can produce the inner transformation that the law requires but cannot affect.

As we come to the end of today’s message, I want to make my point clear. God wants our hearts, and traditions can never cover a heart that is dirty, or far from God. Each year as we approach Christmas and in the evaluation or our own human-made traditions, we must keep our hearts close to God. When our traditions help our hearts draw near to the living God, they bring the real purpose of adoring Christ the Lord. Our primary goal at Christmas is to worship Christ from a pure heart, valuing Jesus as the Greatest Gift ever given, spreading the love and joy of Christ and the gospel to everyone we meet. If our traditions bring joy to the world and turns our hearts in thanksgiving to the God who made us and gave us all things through Christ, then perhaps it will increase our joy and help us spread that joy to others. Amen.

1. James R. Edwards, [*The Gospel according to Mark*](https://ref.ly/logosres/pntcmark?ref=Bible.Mk7.2-5&off=8006&ctx=+implication+of+it.+~In+general%2c+the+Tora), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James R. Edwards, [*The Gospel according to Mark*](https://ref.ly/logosres/pntcmark?ref=Bible.Mk7.6-9&off=1414&ctx=their+commitment+to+~the+oral+tradition%E2%80%94a), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002), 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)