

# TRADITIONS OF THE ELDERS

In Matthew 15, a group of Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem, no doubt to confront Jesus. What appears to have been an impassioned discussion began when the Pharisees and scribes accused Jesus's disciples of not washing their hands before they ate (Matt. 15:2). Now, you won't find this law in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the religious leaders pointed out that Jesus's disciples had broken the "tradition of the elders" (15:2).

To what did the Pharisees and scribes refer to as the "tradition of the elders"? What influenced the development of this tradition? What authority did the "tradition of the elders" have in Jesus's day? What did Jesus think of this tradition?

The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC and took many of the Hebrews to Babylon as prisoners of war. World power shifted when the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 BC. The Persian king (Cyrus the Great) eventually allowed the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> The returning Hebrews realized their exile was God's punishment for their failure to obey His law (given to Moses on Mount Sinai). Back in Jerusalem, religious leaders found themselves in a conundrum. How could they keep the law when it didn't provide specific instructions on some matters? For example, the law directed the Hebrews to "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8). But beyond the instructions to not work on the Sabbath, the law failed to provide application for every Sabbath situation that might arise. Logic dictated that if the Hebrews hoped to avoid future punishment, they had to obey the law, so the religious leaders (especially the Pharisees) expanded the Mosaic law with their own interpretations and applications. This expansion became known as the "oral" tradition or the "tradition of the elders."

The Pharisees and scribes believed the Lord had given Moses both the written and the oral law, and many accepted the "tradition of the elders" with the same authority as the original law God gave Moses. That's why the Pharisees and scribes used the tradition of the elders to criticize Jesus's disciples. However, Jesus, being the master Teacher, used this same tradition of the elders to point out the hypocrisy of His accusers.

Jesus chose one of the most significant Old Testament laws as a case study: "Honor your father and your mother" (Matt. 15:4; see Ex. 20:12). To honor them "meant not just to hold one's parents in high esteem but to care for them financially and in every way."<sup>3</sup> By Jesus's day, though, the tradition of the elders allowed a person to "dedicate" food, money, and property to the Lord for use in the temple. Although details are not clear, this dedication allowed the owner to continue using these resources during his lifetime (Matt. 15:5). One can hear a first-century Jew say, "I would care for my parents, but I have committed my money and property to the Lord and to the temple, so I don't have the financial means to help my parents." This adult child, supported by the tradition of the elders, had a religious foundation to neglect his parents!

What did Jesus think of the tradition of the elders? He pointed out that the one who made such a commitment did not honor his parents at all. He explained that the Pharisees and the scribes, by using the tradition of the elders in such a way, "nullified the word of God" (15:6). Jesus concluded that this man-made tradition of the elders clearly broke the Mosaic law authored by God.

Traditions can be good. But the Pharisees and scribes failed to recognize the difference between the absolute truth of the Mosaic (written) law and the opinions of their "tradition of the elders" (the oral law).

1. The Old Testament does have laws for washing of hands in certain religious situations (see Ex. 30:18-21; Deut. 21:6). The concept of washing hands before eating probably emerged "shortly before the time of Jesus." Richard France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 242.

2. Cyrus also encouraged the Hebrews to rebuild their temple. See Ezra 1:1-5.

3. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. 1 in "Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 586.

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