

February 22, 2004 by Steve Brandon



The Danger of Tradition

Matthew 15:1-9

1. Tradition can become all-important (verses 1-2).
2. Tradition can negate the commandments (verses 3-6).
3. Tradition can create hypocrites (verses 7-9).

What do you think of when you hear the word, "Tradition"? Perhaps the movie, "Fiddler on the Roof" comes to mind. Perhaps you envision Tevya dancing around and singing a tune. Perhaps you shake their head in disgust because of those you know who are overly obsessed with it. Perhaps you think of a certain style of worship called, "traditional worship." Perhaps you think of a series of certain unwritten dress regulations and behavior codes. In fact, before I stood up this morning to preach, my four year old daughter told me how she felt strange not wearing a dress to church this morning as she usually does. Even she is aware of traditions. Perhaps you think of family traditions, which take place every year.

After my wife and I were married, we spent the first few yearly Christmas celebrations with Yvonne's parents in California. I remember the first time that we were with them that it came time to open the presents under the Christmas tree and both of Yvonne's parents left. Her father came back with some German beer mugs, which were filled with eggnog. I had never seen these cups before, but out they came on Christmas morning. It was explained to me that they always have eggnog in these certain mugs every Christmas morning. Yvonne's mother helped with a loaf of strange looking bread. I soon learned that the bread is called, "brioche." Apparently, every Christmas morning in their household, this bread is eaten while opening presents. I came to understand a bit about their traditions. When the next year came around, I recognized the mugs and the bread.

Another tradition to which I was exposed in Yvonne's family was the practice of praying for travel as we began a trip. We were headed up to the Lake Tahoe area to spend a few days. When we were on the 680 freeway heading north, about a few miles away from town, Yvonne's father said, "Let's pray." He began to pray for our trip as he drove the car. He prayed for safety and for a God-honoring time. I didn't think much about it, but was encouraged that he would seek the Lord's blessing on our trip. But, the next Christmas, when we were again going to travel to Lake Tahoe to spend a few days, the exact same thing occurred. On the same spot of the highway, he prayed for the Lord's blessings upon our trip. I discerned that it was a tradition to do this while travelling. My wife confirmed that it was.

Some traditions that we hold today are quite helpful to us. The tradition of praying just as you begin a trip is a good tradition. It helps to focus upon what is important. The tradition of praying before meals is a good one, as it reminds us of the source of the food that sustains our life. There are many other traditions that are helpful. Other traditions are just plain fun. Drinking eggnog and enjoying brioche at Christmas time helps to create enjoyable family memories. But, there are some traditions that are hurtful to us. They are hurtful when they distract our attention away from the things that are important. In this way, traditions can be very dangerous to us.

Our text this morning demonstrates the danger of traditions. This is a topic that was relevant for the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, and it also is particularly relevant to us today. Here is the first danger of tradition.

1. Tradition can become all-important (verses 1-2).

As chapter 15 begins, we find Jesus ministering to the people in the region of Galilee. The 5,000 were fed alone on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus walked across the sea of Galilee. Certainly, His reputation was spreading far and wide with each passing day. Apparently, the news had reached Jerusalem of a wonder-working prophet in the region of Galilee. So, some of the religious experts came from Jerusalem to check Him out. The trip these religious leaders made was not a small undertaking. Galilee was about 100 miles from Jerusalem. It would take you four or five days to make this journey if you were walking or traveling on a donkey.

Mark tells us that these religious men had *actually witnessed* the disciples of Jesus eating bread without washing their hands (Mark 7:2). They were appalled that Jesus' disciples would do such a thing! Now, for those of you with young boys, might think that you know all about this. However, your concern is one of hygiene. These Pharisees and scribes were concerned with ritual purity. And they believed that you were ritually purified when and only when you washed your hands according to the traditions of the elders. It was inconceivable for these men to even think of eating any type of food without first washing their hands. Matthew 15:1-2 tells us what these men did.

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem, saying, "Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." (Matt. 15:1-2)

Isn't this amazing? Of all of the things that the religious leaders knew of Jesus, it was this one tradition that became their stumbling point. Certainly these religious leaders knew how the people marveled at the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 7:28-29). They must have known that Jesus was casting demons out of people (Matt. 12:22). They must have known of the multitudes that Jesus had fed (Matt. 14:13-21), and how many were being healed just by touching "the fringe of His cloak" (Matt. 14:34-36). Certainly these religious leaders knew of all of these things. But

what did they approach Jesus with? Their traditions. They traveled four or five days to ask Jesus about hand washing? This ought to demonstrate to you how important tradition was to them. To the Jew, tradition was all-important. Listen to Mark 7:3, "The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders" (Mark 7:3).

This tradition was ingrained into their minds as being necessary in order to walk a godly life. From a very young age, Jewish boys and girls were taught exactly how they were to wash before they ate. The Jews used to keep containers of pure water in their homes which they could use to wash. Perhaps you remember when Jesus turned the water into wine, He used the water in "the six stone waterpots [which were] set there for the Jewish custom of purification" (John 2:6). Each of these pots would hold twenty or thirty gallons of water. It was important that this water was clean. They would draw water out of these large containers with a cup. They had strict regulations upon how large the cup should be. In order to have an official cleansing, the tradition was very particular on the size of the cup. It needed to hold at least a quarter of a log, which was equivalent to an eggshell and a half. I figured it out to be about an eighth of a cup. They would hold their hands in the air, much like a surgeon does today when he scrubs for surgery. Then, they would pour the water upon their hands, so that the water would run down to the wrists. It was very important that the water would reach their wrists, to purify their entire hands. Once the water was applied to both hands, they could rub their hands together, but not before. [1]

The Jews took this ritual very seriously. The Jewish literature speaks of *Shibta*, an evil spirit, that inflicts harm upon those who eats without washing their hands. *Shibta* sits upon their hands and leaves something behind that is very dangerous. It is this ritual cleansing that will remove *Shibta* from your hands. There was at one time a rabbi whose name was Akiba. He was in prison, and he was given a daily ration of water and food to eat. Rather than drinking the water, he used it to wash his hands before he ate what little was given him. He died in prison of thirst and was held up as a hero. Another man, Eleazar ben Chanac, who "was excommunicated for despising the tradition concerning washing of hands." When he died, the Sanhedrin placed a huge stone upon his coffin which was intended to bring shame upon him by reminding those who visited his tomb that he died in his excommunication. [2]

The Jews took this ritual very seriously. Yet, the curious thing is that this ritual was nowhere to be found in the Bible. If you have been reading along with us in our church-wide Bible reading, you finished recently read through Leviticus this past week. We have been reading about how the priest needs to be cleansed (Lev. 8-10), how only clean food can be eaten (Lev. 11), how a woman needs to be purified after giving birth (Lev. 12), and how one with leprosy can be declared clean or unclean (Lev. 13-14). It goes on and on and on. But, it never speaks about washing hands before eating. In fact, at the time of Jesus, this ritual was nowhere written down. It was part of their "oral tradition." It was part of their religion. It was part of what made them righteous before God. So, when these Pharisees and scribes saw the disciples of Jesus transgressing this tradition, they brought the offense before Jesus.

To us, this tradition looks like a trivial thing. It is easy for us to understand how ridiculous it was for the Pharisees to be so concerned over these petty matters. But the Pharisees thought that it was all-important. This is how traditions work. They grow within people to the point that they become consumed with it, and the tradition begins to take the focus of their religion. What becomes important is the keeping of the traditions. Often, those who hold to these traditions are blind to what is really important. In verse 14, Jesus describes these Pharisees as "blind guides of the blind." They were so focused upon their traditions, that they were blinded to what is important.

We might be tempted to think that the influences of tradition doesn't affect the church today. But that's not so! What was true of the Jewish religion at the time of Jesus is every bit as true of Christian religion today. There are those today who exalt their traditions to the point that they are extremely upset when you practice something different, even when this tradition is nowhere taught in the Bible.

Today, there are traditions that hold to particular Bible translations as the only correct Bible that you are permitted to read. Churches will put forth proudly that they are a "KJV only" church. Many in those churches wouldn't ever think about reading any other version of the Bible. It becomes so important that they will hold themselves aloof from anyone who reads a different translation. There are traditions that hold to particular confessions of faith. Some say that the 1689 London Baptist Confession is the greatest of confessions. The same is true of the Westminster Confession of Faith. There are those who place these confessions at the center of their beliefs. Don't get me wrong, I believe these are great documents and articulate much of what I believe. The danger comes when they begin to take center stage as all-important.

There are cultural customs that we follow. At our church, we don't pass an offering plate. We have an offering box. How easy is it for us to allow the offering box to take center stage and question those who pass an offering plate. This is our tradition, but there is nothing sacred about it. We have customs of how we pray. We often close our eyes and bow our heads. But this isn't the only outward manner of prayer that is acceptable. Jesus often spoke with His eyes open and focused up to heaven when He prayed (John 17:1; 11:41). There are certain ways that we speak, which almost becomes another language, "Christianese."

Some think that the number and frequency of church services are important. We need to have Sunday School and corporate worship on Sunday morning. We need to have a Sunday evening service and a Wednesday evening prayer meeting. You can't deviate from this plan. Some believe in standards of dress for each church service. The men wear suits and the ladies wear dresses. Some are convinced on their choice of schooling for their children as the only proper Biblical option. Some have certain parenting methodologies for their parenting activities, which they want everyone else to follow, because they are convinced that it is God's only way of raising children.

Then, of course, there are the many legalistic standards that pervade the church. Some believe that any drinking of alcohol is a sin. Some believe that smoking cigarettes or cigars are sinful. Some think that it is sinful to step foot into a theatre.

The danger in each of these traditions is when they take center stage in their lives. Admittedly, some of these traditions help people in their walk with God. They are guided practically in how to dress and how to raise godly children. Some of these traditions help keep people away from dangerous influences in their lives. However, the danger comes when people are more interested in the outward practice of their Christianity than they are in anything else. Let me speak in depth of two such examples in the church today.

A. Music

Musical tradition is blinding. Some people say that you can sing only hymns in the church -- that God is not pleased with any other kind of music. Others will never attend a church that sings only hymns. They say that they simply don't like hymns. Many people choose a church based upon the music, rather than upon the truth that is believed and taught in the church. (That last sentence ought to convince you of how important the tradition of music is for some). In fact, I remember speaking with one man who was very concerned with the style of music in the church. He said to me, "I believe that music is the most important issue in the church today." Tradition had blinded that man. To him, music has become everything. He steps into a church and evaluates it based upon the music. If the music is acceptable to him, the church is doing it right. If the music isn't acceptable to him, the church has major problems. It is no different than the Pharisees. Washing hands was an all-important issue for them.

B. Denominations

The pull of denominationalism is strong. If a person is saved in a Baptist church, they often begin to think that the Baptists are those who have it right. If a person grows up in a Presbyterian Church, they can't even consider any other option. It even goes so far that when many are asked what religion they are, they reply with something like, "I'm a Methodist." People will live for the advancement of their denomination. They grow comfortable with the culture.

I know one man who is a member of a liberal Presbyterian church. He's been exposed to another churches in his area that doing well and where Christ is being preached. But he will never leave the Presbyterian church. One of the reasons for this is that the church follows the Westminster Confession of Faith, which has articulated the truth of Christianity with great accuracy. He told me that every member must publicly acknowledge that they hold to the beliefs of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Yet, he told me that hardly anybody really believes what it says. He has even told me that he doesn't even think that his pastor is a converted man. But, he will never leave his church because the issue of the denomination is all-important in his mind.

These are only two examples of the many traditions that are held in the church today, which have taken center stage in the life of some. There are many more.

The problem with these traditions is that they cloud the main thing. **The main thing is Jesus Christ and Him crucified.** When Paul came to Corinth, he preached Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:22). He even said, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). It doesn't mean that all he said was, "Jesus Christ crucified." But, what it means is that he always and continually brought everything back to the centrality of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which **is** the message of Christianity. We don't preach a thing or a philosophy or an idea. We preach a person. We preach Jesus Christ. We preach His death upon the cross as a sufficient substitute (2 Cor. 5:21). He died in our place. His death was satisfying the wrath of God (Rom. 3:25). By faith in Christ, God is no longer at enmity with us. Christ's sacrifice is our only reason to boast before God (Gal. 6:14). If we were left to ourselves, we would be entirely lost in our sins. We preach His resurrection from the dead. His resurrection is God's confirmation of His acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus (Rom. 1:4). Everything that Jesus said was true. His resurrection is the basis for our hope of a new life to come with a new body to enjoy God forever (1 Cor. 15:22, 42). It is in Christ that we will be made alive as our hope of His soon return (1 Cor. 15:23). He is seated now at the right hand of God and will return to gather us unto Himself. Jesus Christ (and everything that He is) is ours by faith in Him.

This is the all-important thing at Rock Valley Bible Church. Everything centers around the work of Christ on the cross. The day that we begin to direct our focus anywhere else is the day that Rock Valley Bible Church has just elevated something of lesser importance to something of greatest importance. You need to realize that our traditions can easily come to have all-importance in the life of our church. We can easily pride ourselves on the things that we do and the things that we practice. We need to realize where the Bible stops and where our traditions take over.

At Rock Valley Bible Church, we have our traditions. There is often nothing wrong with them. There was nothing inherently wrong with a hand-washing ceremony. The problem comes, however, when the tradition takes center stage and becomes all important. Sometimes it is good for you to do something different, just so you realize that it is a tradition. Over the next six weeks, I want to stir us up a bit. Some churches celebrate the Lord's supper every week. It isn't our practice to do so, but neither is it wrong. I have spoken with several people over the years who have told me how they are attending a church that celebrates the Lord's Supper every week and they can hardly imagine not doing so. During Lent this year, we are going to get a taste of what this is like. Beginning next week, for the next six weeks, we celebrate the Lord's Supper every week. After these six weeks, we will go back to our usual every 4-6 weeks routine. Based upon your feedback, we may well do this again during Lent next year. At any rate, it will remind us that the frequency of our celebrating the Lord's Supper is a tradition, with which we can easily bend. Perhaps there are other areas in your life that you should change for a season to remind you that your tradition is only that, a tradition.

We come to another danger with tradition.

2. Tradition can negate the commandments (verses 3-6)

My point is simply a restatement of what Jesus said in verse 3,

"And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Matt. 15:3).

These Pharisees and scribes had become so focused upon their traditions, that the commandments of God were neglected. Jesus backed up his words of principles (in verse 3) with an example (in verses 4-6). Jesus beings by putting forth two commandments found in the Bible. He said,

"For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death'" (Matt. 15:4).

In verse 4, Jesus puts forth the clear commandments of God. The first comes from Exodus 20:12. It is part of the original 10 commandments that the LORD gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. We know it well, "Honor your father and mother." It simply tells us to hold our parents high. We are to respect them. We are to bring them no shame. We are to roll out the red carpet for them. We are to do our part in seeing that things go well for them. The second command that Jesus gave is from Exodus 21:17. We don't know this one so well. But, it simply helps explain what it means to "honor your father and mother." Moses wrote, "He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death." Honoring our father and mother goes further than simply respecting them. We are to speak well of them. We are to speak no words against them. This wasn't any trivial matter, either. This was a matter of life or death. (Enforcing this commandment would certainly put a stop to anybody's worries about overpopulating the planet.) These clear teachings from the Law of God simply put forth God's heart for parents. God is very concerned that fathers and mothers receive honor from their children.

In verse 5, Jesus gives the tradition of the Jews,

"Whoever shall say to his father or mother, 'Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given [to God].'" (Matt. 15:5)

This verse is a bit confusing, but it's not too difficult. The idea was that the Jewish people were permitted to give of their possessions to God. They did this by making a vow. Once the vow was made, it could never be revoked. Often, those who made these vows could still use their possessions, but they were given to God. Suppose, for instance, that I had a nice coat in my closet, which I vowed to God. I could use the coat to wear on my way up to worship in the temple. I could use the coat to wear on another trip for religious purposes. It was dedicated to the use of the Lord. I couldn't use it for anything else. But, my father, who is poor, doesn't have a coat. Though my coat in my closet would fit him and benefit him, I was forbidden for me to give it to him, because it was given to God. It could help my father from being cold. But, "Anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given [to God]" (verse 5). So, I am prohibited from giving him the coat. This small example could apply to essentially anything of yours that you might have to help your parents. Essentially, these legal loopholes allowed a son or daughter to legally dishonor a father or a mother. As verse 6 says, "He is not to honor his father or his mother" because what could help has been given to the Lord, and cannot be used for any other purpose. It looks pious; you have made a vow to God. But, it avoids helping your parents with simple needs and it violates the commandments.

In verse 6, Jesus restates the principle:

"And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:6).

When they came to make a choice between tradition and commandment, the tradition won out. One rabbi gave the following advice, "My son, attend to 'the words of the Scribes,' more than to the words of the law. ... everyone that transgresses the words of the Scribes is guilty of death." Rabbi Ishmael said regarding the words of the law, "some of them are light, and some heavy, but 'the words of the Scribes' are all of them heavy. Weightier are the words of the elders, than the words of the prophets." ^[3] I quote these Rabbis for you to get the sense of how strongly they held on to their tradition. We see what Jesus was teaching as obvious. But these Jews were blinded to it. When Jesus said these things, do you think that the Pharisees and the scribes said, "You know what? Jesus, you are right. We need to change some things." No. Anyone who holds onto a tradition will hold tenaciously to it, and they will not let it go.

Once again, we might be tempted to proclaim: I'm so glad that this doesn't ever happen in the church today! What was true for the Jewish people 2,000 years ago is equally true today in Christian churches. Anytime a church begins to focus their attention upon their traditions, the word of God quickly become delegated to second place. And eventually, the tradition overshadows the Scripture. I believe that this is nowhere more true today than it is in the Roman Catholic Church. This week I pulled out a Roman Catholic Catechism that I have upon my shelves ^[4]. It says in the very front: "Important: This book contains the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, Proper John Paul II, Supreme Pontiff. The Nihil obstat and Imprimatur notations on page 2 are official Roman Catholic declarations that this catechism is free of doctrinal and/or moral error." So, I hold in my hand the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. They claim it contains no error.

I turned to page 9 to see what the Roman Catholic Church teaches about "The Bible and Tradition."

Question #9: "Do we get from the Bible alone all our knowledge and certainty about what God has told us?"

Answer: "No, there is also Sacred Tradition."

Question #10: "What is Tradition?"

Answer: "The Word of God handed on to us by the Apostles in their preaching and by their successors in the Church to the present day."

Question #11: "Do you have to believe in Tradition?"

Answer: "Yes, because Tradition hands on in its full purity God's word. Sacred Tradition together with Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God."

In other words, you have the teaching of the Bible on one hand and the teaching of the tradition on the other hand. Which takes priority? They say that they are of equal authority, but like the Phairsees of old, it is really the tradition that holds the priority for them.

There are many places in this book to which I could turn to demonstrate that it is the Tradition that has priority over the Bible. For the sake of time, I turn to the discussion on sin, found on pages 31 and 32.

Question #1: "What is sin?"

Answer: "Sin is any thought, word, desire, action or neglect forbidden by the law of God."

(So far, so good).

Question #3: "How many kinds of sin are there?"

Answer: "Two kinds of personal sin--mortal and venial."

Question #4: "What is mortal sin?"

Answer: "A big sin, a serious violation of God's law. ... Examples: adultery, stealing something expensive, complete drunkenness."

Question #6: "Where do you go if you die in mortal sin?"

Answer: "You will go to hell forever."

Question #8: "What is venial sin?"

Answer: "A less serious violation of God's law, an offense not serious enough to break off friendship with God. ... Examples: Impatience, ordinary anger, stealing something cheap."

Question #10: "Where will you go if you die in venial sin?"

Answer: "Before going to Heaven, you must go to Purgatory."

At one point this past week, my nine year old daughter came into my study. She saw my Roman Catholic Catechism lying around and asked about it. I talked with her a little bit about it and shared these same questions and answers with her. When I read through them, her face became all distorted, because she was confused. She knew that something didn't sound right. She has been so saturated with the Biblical teaching, that she knew of how wrong and strange this teaching appeared.

You have heard the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church Tradition. Now, let me give you the teaching of the Bible. Certainly there are sins that are greater than others. It is a greater sin to steal \$1,000 from someone than to steal \$1. To be accurate, it is 1,000 times worse. The murder of another individual is certainly a greater sin than impatience. But, **the Bible nowhere indicates that a larger sin deserves more punishment than a smaller sin.** Jesus said that if you look on a woman to lust for her, you are guilty of adultery (Matt. 5:28). I would admit that the act of adultery is a worse sin than thinking about adultery. It is carrying through with the thought. But Jesus said that thinking about adultery makes you "guilty of adultery." In Jesus' mind, there isn't this scale of punishment for a lesser sin. Or consider Proverbs 11:1, "A false balance is an abomination to the LORD." A false balance is the practice of cheating a customer of a small fraction of what they pay for. The cereal box says that you are getting 15 ounces of cereal, but really, you are getting only 14 ½ ounces. This is like stealing something small. I would admit that stealing a 15 ounce box of cereal is worse than stealing a ½ ounce of cereal. But, this verse says that even stealing something small is an abomination to the LORD. An abomination is something that is utterly detestable in God's sight, which deserves eternal punishment.

The Bible teaches that any sin before God is an abomination and worthy of eternal damnation before God. In other words, even the smallest of sins are deserving of eternal punishment. The Bible puts it this way, "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (James 2:10). If you have a difficulty in believing this, it is because you don't understand the holiness of God. God is infinitely holy and pure and righteous. Any transgression against Him will defile His infinite holiness. When you defile infinite holiness, you deserve eternal punishment. So, if you struggle with this teaching, that all sins demand eternal punishment, realize that you struggle with the very character of God.

This Biblical teaching demands repentance of us all in that no sin is too small that does not need to be forsaken. Even the smallest of sins is capable of sending us to hell. But, this also gives great hope in that no sin is too large to be forgiven in the cross of Christ. The good news of the gospel is this, though we have all gone astray, "the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all upon Him" (Is. 53:6). Big sins or small sins -- it doesn't matter. Our hope is in the sin-atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This is a glorious and soul-satisfying hope. Horatio Spafford said it well, "My sin--O, the bliss of this glorious thought, My sin--not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!"

And so when the Roman Catholic Church hears the Biblical testimony that all sins deserve eternal punishment and puts it up against their tradition, which advocates two types of sins, mortal and venial, only one of which condemns to hell, which do you think holds the greater weight? Sadly, there is no question. The tradition will always win over the Scripture because they believe that the catechism is without error. If there is any conflict, they teach that you need to alter your understanding of the Scripture to meet the teaching of the catechism. This happens because tradition can negate the commandments.

If you are talking with a Roman Catholic, you need to know that this type of teaching is highly offensive to them. You are attacking their authority structure. You are attacking the Pope! You are attacking the church! You are attacking their basis of truth. The same phenomenon will take place if you speak with a Jehovah's Witness about the wrong teaching of the Watchtower society. The same phenomenon will take place if you speak with a Mormon about the wrong teaching of the Mormon church. In their minds, the church has equal authority with the Bible. Or, more properly as it works out in practice, their church has more authority than the Bible, because their church explains the Bible

and cannot err. So, as you speak with these people, realize that your words will be offensive to them. But, this isn't anything new. The Pharisees were greatly offended when Jesus said these things. When Jesus demonstrated to them how their focus upon keeping their vows to God had actually led them to deny the 5th commandment in practice, they didn't like it at all. In verse 12, we are told that "the disciples came and said to [Jesus], 'Do You know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this statement?'" (Matt. 15:12).

May I encourage you to speak with them in such a way that they are offended by what you said, and not by how you said it. Don't speak arrogantly, knowing that it is only God's grace that has opened your eyes to the truth. Don't speak unlovingly. Don't speak without a heart for them to repent. Speak with compassion, while praying for God to make your speech seasoned with grace (Col. 4:6). Don't back down from speaking with them. But, speak with compassion and love to them. Also, in your speaking, don't make the tradition the main focus. Make the cross of Christ and faith alone in Him as the main focus.

We come to the third danger of tradition, ...

3. Tradition can create hypocrites (verses 7-9).

Jesus said,

"You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'" (Matt. 15:7-9)

In verse 7, Jesus called these Pharisees, "hypocrites." They had so focused their attention upon their own external regulations, that they had missed the heart of a worshiper. In this case with the Pharisees, they have focused their attention upon how they wash their hands. In their minds, you haven't worshiped if you haven't done all of the ceremonial things exactly correct. You haven't worshiped if you haven't said everything exactly correct. Everything to them was about externals. These people may have bowed low in times of prayer, said "Amen" to every prayer that was uttered, sung loud in their worship, and raised high their hands in worship. As leaders of their synagogues, they may have expounded great doctrine from their pulpits, prayed fervently with great display of passion and emotion, and followed their liturgy exactly right. But, they missed one thing. They missed the most important thing. They missed the importance of their heart. "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me" (verse 8).

They built this snazzy-looking sports car. The outside is painted all nice and shiny red. The seats are made of 100% leather with seat warmers. The stereo system in the car is phenomenal; it sounds like you're in a studio. Air bags have been included, front and back. The suspension is state of the art. But there's a problem. They lacked an engine. And without an engine, it's not going anywhere. Though it may look nice on the outside, it is dysfunctional. You will never find it riding down the road. It is useless.

When you say the right things with the wrong heart, you don't get anywhere with God. This is what verse 9 says, "In vain do they worship Me." The word, "vain" means, "empty." Worship without heart is empty worship. I don't care how good it looks on the outside. I don't care how good it sounds. When a heart is far from God, nothing happens. That's not quite correct. Something happens. God hates the worship.

In Isaiah 1, the people were coming to worship God with sacrifices, just as God had instructed them to do. God said, ...

verse 11 - I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats.

verse 13 - ... Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me. ... I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.

verse 14 - I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them.

verse 15 - So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you. Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.

The Israelites were so focused in making sure that they did everything right on the outside. They took great care in bringing the right offerings and celebrating the right festivals and feasts, that they neglected a heart that was sensitive to sin. When they brought this worship to God, God said that He couldn't endure it (verse 13). He hated it (verse 14). He was going to shut His eyes and plug His ears (verse 15). It was like the scratch of fingernails upon a chalkboard. He couldn't stand listening to it. It was like a scary movie. He couldn't bear to watch what was about to happen. I remember as a child watching "The Wizard of Oz," and being so scared of the flying monkeys that I couldn't watch the movie. I had to leave the room. And this is what God does when worshipers seek to worship God without a heart of worship. God leaves the room and covers His eyes because He is so displeased with the worship.

Again, we could be tempted to think, "I'm so glad that the church today doesn't have any problems with worship that is only external." But, this is certainly not the case. This is a major problem across our land! There are 400,000 churches in America. Countless millions attend those churches every week. Countless millions attend those churches out of duty and not delight. They attend church because they are in the habit of attending church. It's what they feel they are supposed to do. They do their God-thing for an hour and forget about Him the rest of the week.

But, I don't think that the problem of hypocritical worship is only out there in other churches. I think that it is in here as well. Hypocritical worship certainly takes place here at Rock Valley Bible Church. I know that because I struggle with having a heart that fully wants to worship God each Sunday. How is it with you? Are you here today because it is your habit to come? Or, are you here today because there is no other place on the planet that you would rather be than to be here worshipping with the people at Rock Valley Bible Church. Only a car accident, or a death in the family, or your own extreme sickness could ever keep you away. Did you wake up this morning with an exclamation of delight, "Yes! It's Sunday! I can't wait to be with God's people and worship God."

If you are in the habit of attending Rock Valley Bible Church out of duty and not out of delight, perhaps God is telling you what He told the Israelites in Amos 5. This is what he said,

I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fattings. Take away from Me the noise of your sons; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps (Amos 5:21-23)..

God says, "When you gather to sing in the church, I want to run from you. I can't stand your music." Why? Because there is no heart! It is all externals!

What does Jesus say is the core of the Pharisees' problem? Verse 9, "teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." This is the core of their problem. They take the precepts of men and elevate them to be as trustworthy as the doctrines of God. What are the "precepts of men" but the traditions that have been handed down from other generations? I take out my Roman Catholic catechism and read on page 9, "Do you have to believe in Tradition? Yes, because Tradition hands on in its full purity God's word." In effect, this catechism is saying "we teach as doctrines, the precepts of men." God says, "In vain do they worship Me" (verse 9).

Tradition is dangerous, because, tradition can create hypocrites. Whenever a church is enamored by its traditions, there is a great danger of creating hypocrites within the church. There are plenty of churches with massive traditions. The more you place your emphasis upon all of your traditions, the more you take the hearts of the people away from God and upon your traditions.

When the Book of Common Prayer gets the focus, when the liturgy gets the focus, when the things that you do get the focus, it will pull the hearts of people away from God. When the focus become when you say "Amen," and when you stand and when you sit and when you genuflect and when you kneel, it will focus their attention upon the tradition and not upon God. This is why I believe that "simple worship is the best worship." Simple worship is the least distracting. At Rock Valley Bible Church, we have tried hard to keep things simple. Each week, our worship begins with a call to worship God with a pure heart. After that, we have three things we do: 1. We praise, 2. We pray, 3. We preach. It's not overly complex. There is a reason why it isn't complex. We want to focus our heart upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

We want our worship to focus upon the One who has loved us, chosen us, called us, made us alive, forgiven us, bought us, redeemed us, purified us, reconciled us, suffered for us, become sin for us, opened our eyes to see Him, granted us faith, granted us repentance, brought us near, freed us from sin, blessed us with blessings, and become our example. Today, He guides us, guards us, prays for us, encourages us, strengthens us, purifies us, and dwells in our hearts. Someday, He will come again, destroy His enemies, bring us into His kingdom, give us glorified bodies, receive our worship, and grant us pleasures forevermore in His presence.

Why would we ever want to focus upon the traditions of men? We want our worship to be simple. We want our worship to focus upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 22, 2004 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, pp. 482-483.

[2] See John Gill's Commentary on Matthew for each detail in this paragraph.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Rev. William J. Cogan, A Catechism for Adults, published in 1987.