



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## “The Traditions That You Were Taught”

2 Thessalonians 2:15

David Anguish

### *Introduction*

1. Join me in thinking through the following.
  - a. True or False: It is good and wise to have a prayer before taking up the offering, but our worship would be just as much in line with Scripture if we did not have that prayer.
  - b. As you think about that, consider:
    - i. There was a time, not all that many years ago, where churches generally (in some regions at least) did not have a prayer before the offering.<sup>1</sup>
    - ii. There is no New Testament passage that explicitly states or implies that the first Christians had a prayer before the collection; we know they collected it on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2), but we are never told how or when that collection occurred.
2. This example points us to what may be the most difficult challenge in any effort to be simply Christians, practicing our faith in line with what was expected in the New Testament era.
  - a. We saw the point exemplified in our previous study of Nehemiah 8 where the people did not hold on to their traditional way of celebrating the Feast of Booths because they discovered in God’s law that they had not been doing it right.
  - b. In the interest of binding only where God has bound, while granting liberty (loosing) where he has granted it (Matthew 16:19; 18:18), we must seek to correctly distinguish between human custom and divine obligation.
  - c. Nehemiah helps us see part of the problem. Experience teaches us that we also need to learn what to do with traditions that develop as expedient ways of doing things when the reason for those expedients no longer exists.

---

<sup>1</sup> When I was 15, I visited two weeks with my uncle in our native Ohio. One day during that visit, my cousin, then three years old, wanted to “play church.” When we got to Lord’s supper/contribution part of the service, she wanted to have a prayer before the “collection.” While that is fairly standard practice among us now, during the first fifteen years of my life—on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line (southeastern Ohio and Atlanta, GA)—I had never been in a service where someone had led a prayer before the contribution. (My sons, now in their 30s, have never seen it done the other way.) Wanting to be sure that my cousin got things right, I corrected her: “We don’t have a prayer before the collection.” When I said that, her mother, watching from across the room, intervened. “Her Daddy does,” she said. I had treated a traditional practice of human origin as a divinely ordained rite. (Since I had gone to church with them and had not seen a prayer before the offering there either, it is apparent that the custom varied there depending upon who was presiding.)

3. We need to talk about this issue for it is often “the elephant in the room,” having an impact on what we think and do, but not a subject that anyone wants to address directly.

### Body

#### I. Tradition: Speaking Where the Bible Speaks.

A. Consider this: which of the following are things that, either because of a Bible reference or general use, can be correctly described with word “tradition”?

1. The time of services: specifically, a Sunday morning service, followed by an afternoon break and then a Sunday evening service.
2. Having the Lord’s supper before the sermon.
3. The choice of the term “gospel meeting” over “revival.”
4. The singing of an “invitation song” after every sermon of the assembled church.
5. The teaching about Jesus’ ministry presented in the gospels. [Luke 1:2]
6. The teachings from the apostles in response to questions about the circumcision of Gentiles. [Acts 16:4]
7. The fundamental components of the gospel: death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. [1 Corinthians 15:3]
8. The teaching that Jesus instituted the Lord’s supper on the night he was betrayed and took first the bread, then the cup as the elements of that supper. [1 Corinthians 11:23]<sup>2</sup>

B. In truth *all* of these can be correctly described with the word “tradition.”

1. The first four are expedient methods used to facilitate some aspect of service.<sup>3</sup>
2. The last four are God-ordained expectations described with the word “tradition” or its verbal counterpart, “handed down.”

C. Analysis of the word.

1. The verbal form is παραδίδωμι, *paradidōmi*, “to hand over, to deliver.”
  - a) It is the word translated “betray” (e.g., 10 times in Matthew 26:2, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24, 25, 45, 46, 48; see the parallels in Mark, Luke and John), of someone being “arrested” (Mark 1:14) or handed over to a ruler (Matthew 17:22; 18:34) or of such things as a master entrusting money to a slave (Matthew 25:14, 20).
  - b) And sometimes, it’s used of teaching that is handed down.
    - (1) We usually think of a human tradition that is handed down (e.g., Mark 7:13).
    - (2) But the word is also used of God-ordained teaching that is to be handed down from one group of Christians to the next (Luke 1:2; Acts 16:4; 1 Corinthians 11:2, 23; 15:3; 2 Peter 2:21; Jude 3).
2. The noun form is παράδοσις, *paradosis*, that which is handed over; in the NT, it is always used in the sense of “tradition,” either of human origin (e.g., Mark 7:3, 5, 8, 9, 13; Colossians 2:8) or of God-ordained things that are to be handed down (1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6).

#### II. Tradition Human and Divine: Two Exemplary Texts.

<sup>2</sup> In cases where the word tradition or its verbal equivalent appear in the biblical text with the item in question, the appropriate NT passage has been added. In presenting this material, I use more than one Power Point slide, adding the passages later in the discussion to aid the thought process.

<sup>3</sup> I do not intend in any of these cases to suggest that it is wrong to observe these traditions, or that any of them necessarily must be changed, merely that we see them for what they are, expedients that we have adopted to follow specific teachings in God’s will.

## A. Mark 7:1-13

1. What happens in the text.
  - a) The scribes and Pharisees ask why Jesus' disciples do not wash their hands before eating, a ceremonial rite that followed "the tradition (παράδοσιν, *paradosin*) of the elders" (vv 3, 5).
  - b) Jesus replied that they had elevated their traditions to the level of "commandments of men" (vv 6-8).
  - c) He then took it a step further, accusing them of "rejecting the commandment of God" and "making void the word of God" by their "tradition" (9-13; παράδοσις is used in vv 3, 5, 8, 9, 13; παραδίδωμι in v 13).
2. Josephus substantiates the background that Mark inserts in vv 3-4: "... the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the law of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of the forefathers."<sup>4</sup>
3. Notice that the problem was not that they practiced their traditions, but that they had elevated what were merely human traditions to the status of divine law, a move that led them to condemn and judge any who did not practice their ways.
4. Of interest is that Paul, a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Philippians 3:5), will later contrast the way of Christ with the "traditions" (παράδοσις) of his fathers (Galatians 1:14) and stipulate that Jesus' disciples are not to allow others to bind "the tradition of men" (τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, *tēn paradosin tōn anthrōpōn*) on them (Colossians 2:8).

## B. 1 Corinthians 11:23.

1. In this text, Paul uses the verb παραδίδωμι along with παραλαμβάνω (*paralambanō*, to receive) to teach the Corinthians that they were to follow and pass on instruction regarding the Lord's supper that they had received "from the Lord."
2. We see this use of the word several times in the New Testament.
  - a) In most cases, the verb is used to stress the handing down of divinely ordained traditions (Luke 1:2; Acts 16:4; 1 Corinthians 11:2; 15:3; 2 Peter 2:21; Jude 3).<sup>5</sup>
  - b) Three times, the noun is used to make the point (1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6). (Note that in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, the traditions include things *written* as well as spoken.)

## III. What To Do with Traditions.

- A. It is clear that we need to carefully study both the Word and our practices to distinguish between what must be handed down because it is divine and what does not have to be handed down because it is of human origin.
  1. As we do this, we must remember that other words (teach, doctrine, commands, etc.) also bear on the issue; in other words, our concern is not just with texts that use the tradition word-group.

<sup>4</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.10.6 [§ 297]. The traditions were later recorded in the *Talmud* in six divisions: agriculture, festivals, and marriage, along with civil, criminal, and ceremonial laws.

<sup>5</sup> It is also worth noting that there are two texts (parallels) where Jesus says that he was receiving what had been handed down by the Father (Matthew 11:27 = Luke 10:22).

2. It is also important to remember that just because a tradition is human does not mean it *must* be set aside; if it's still expedient, we are wise to keep it.<sup>6</sup>
- B. Having said that, we must discuss what is necessary to help everyone understand what is divinely ordained and what is merely of human origin.
  1. Failure to do this results in tension when people feel a divine truth is being abandoned when it is only a new human way that is being changed.
  2. The process will involve at least the following.
    - a) We must seek to understand and help others understand how and why the different traditions (whether divine or human) have developed.
    - b) Where human traditions are concerned, we must evaluate them according to the continuing need (but with caution—some things are not worth the fight).
    - c) We must learn to grant liberty for others to do things differently.

### Conclusion

1. A few years ago, a young lady who had moved to a new city asked my counsel in evaluating some things she was seeing in the churches she was visiting as she determined where she would identify. It became evident that she needed a sounding board more than advice. Some were doing things that made her uncomfortable, but she was aware that the issue might not be unfaithfulness, but questions of tradition. "I've got to sort out whether I'm uncomfortable with what I'm seeing because I've never seen it before or because it really does go against the word of God," she said.
2. Exactly. She understood what some apparently miss: it is not just the Pharisees of old who can treat human traditions as divine law. If we are consistent with our restoration ideal, we should be open to the possibility that just because we've always done it a certain way does not mean that's the way it has to be. At the same time, we must also be open to the possibility that somewhere someone has elevated tradition over the word of God (as in Mark 7) and/or is requiring a human way as if it is the word of God.
3. To not admit this is to claim that there is nothing more to learn from God's will, that we have mastered everything and are doing it all perfectly. Or it could be that we have just quit studying and are no longer open to the convicting power of the Word (Hebrews 4:12; 5:11-14; Acts 17:11).
4. None of these alternatives should be acceptable to anyone concerned to do God's will. And that is what really matters.

March 22, 2009  
[www.davidanguish.com](http://www.davidanguish.com)

\* Note: much of the above was originally presented as part of an article entitled, "Simply Christians: Seeking God's Ideal Today," in *First Century Christian*. For the points included in this outline, see the third installment, published August-September 2001, pp. 8-9.

---

<sup>6</sup> We must keep in mind that expedients are necessary. For example, the expectation that we will meet requires that we have some place to meet. Whether that's a house, a rented hall, or an owned building is a matter of judgment, but some method has to be chosen. Likewise, we are to meet on the first day of the week and do certain things in worship and edification. When we meet on that day and the particulars of how we do the things we are expected to do are matters of judgment, open to different traditions in different times and places. But choices have to be made.