

# The Lens of Your Past Predicts Your Future Matthew 15:1-20

## Scripture Reading: Psalm 78:1-8

### Introduction

#### Tradition!

What images does that word conjure up for you?

For some of us it may bring to mind **the bedrock of civilization and of the faith** – fond memories of the good old days and the way things used to be

And then quick on its heels the lament that we have drifted far from those things and the sincere belief that things would be better if we could just get back to our roots

Others may think thoughts of **dust and dryness – of old ways that are no longer relevant** because they've become boring, uninspiring, and unnecessarily restrictive to people today

And with those images comes the urgent thought that we need to leave those things in the past where they belong and move on with life

#### Tradition!

If you are familiar with the musical play Fiddler on the Roof you probably have the opening song running through your mind right now

The play concerns a Russian Jew named Tevye who is battling to preserve the ancient Jewish religious and cultural traditions within his family as the times and attitudes around him are changing

#### [Show Video]

That clip shows just how much Tevye values the traditions of his people even though he doesn't know how the traditions got started because tradition let's everyone know **"who he is and what God expects him to do"**

And throughout the play we see Tevye struggle as his respect for tradition clashes with his love for his daughters who reject the tradition of arranged marriage because they desire to marry for love instead

### The struggle over tradition can also wreak havoc in the life of the church

Many a church has become increasingly irrelevant as they have insisted on perpetuating traditions that have not only outlived their usefulness but which actually serve to alienate those they should be trying to reach

However, other churches have swung too far in the other direction as they have succumbed to the tyranny of the present and determined that anything that came before is inferior to whatever is happening today - leading to an erosion of the foundations of the faith

But we don't have to live at either of those extremes

With a proper, biblical understanding of tradition and the role it should play in the life and ministry of the church we can achieve a proper balance where tradition is neither restrictive nor irrelevant

The passage that will be our main focus today contains an account that deals directly with the question of tradition

And through our study this morning I am going to endeavor to show you a biblical description of tradition and to show you the danger that tradition can pose for the church, and to determine what our stance should be regarding tradition

### Because the lens through which we view the past has a direct bearing on our future

Our passage is **Matthew 15:1-20** where we see the religious leaders confront Jesus with a question of tradition

The question they asked is found in **verse 2** –

*"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat."*

## I. Description: Helpful or Hindrance

Clearly, the Pharisees and scribes recognize that the disciples haven't violated a tenet of the Law of Moses as they inquire about a violation of the "tradition of the elders" and not a violation of the Law of Moses

But we need to understand that they held these traditions in very high regard just like Tevye did

In fact, they regarded their traditions in many ways to be even more important than the Law itself because they were the teachings that described the Law and how one could best avoid violating it

In fact, there is a saying in Judaism that goes, "The words of the scribes are lovely beyond the words of the law; for the words of the law are weighty *and* light, but the words of the scribes are *all* weighty"

So the issue in our passage isn't whether the disciples, and by extension, Jesus were law-breakers but what place tradition should have in the life of the believer and, ultimately, the church

The question then is whether we would describe tradition as being **helpful** or a **hindrance** and the answer is that it can be both

The late church historian Jaroslav Pelikan [**show slide**] defined tradition as "the living faith of the dead"

He goes on to say that "Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide."

Tradition, then, isn't something that is dead and relegated to the past

Tradition, rightly understood and applied, can provide us with valuable insights from the past that have stood the test of time and help us resist the cultural blinders of our present day by advising us and helping us to properly shape our practices

God's Word repeatedly speaks of the need to establish a heritage and transmit it to future generations

That was the theme of our Scripture reading from **Psalm 78** where we see that the Law was to be passed on from one generation to the next into perpetuity so that future generations would know what was right and remain faithful to it

In the New Testament we can look to **Hebrews 11** which is commonly called the "Hall of Faith" chapter where we see a long list of people – both named and unnamed – who demonstrated commendable faith in God and his promises

They were all long dead when Hebrews was written but their faith continued to live on and still does today as it serves to inform us in the tradition of faithfulness and what faithfulness looks like

And in **Hebrews 12:1** we read - *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...*

The attitudes and actions of those long-dead saints stand as witnesses to which we can compare our faithfulness today

And in recognizing the continuity between us and the "living faith" or "tradition" of those who went before us we see a corrective to the individualism and pluralism of our day that had even begun to infect the church

Earlier I mentioned the "tyranny of the present" that discounts and dismisses anything other than present day experience - what one person I read during my study called the "narcissism of now" which tells us that we have surpassed the wisdom of all who came before us

Sadly, that is nothing new either in the broader context of culture or in the church as every generation tends to think they have surely reached the stage of maximum wisdom

However, when we study and understand historic Christian tradition we find that it provides us with a foundation born of a more comprehensive spiritual perspective which can keep us from falling prey to the narcissism of the now

## **But tradition can also serve as a hindrance when it is wrongly applied and becomes “traditionalism”**

Whereas Jaroslav Pelikan defined tradition as “the living faith of the dead” he defined traditionalism as “the dead faith of the living” and that “it is traditionalism that gives tradition a bad name”

Pelikan goes on to say, “The reformers of every age, whether political or religious or literary, have protested against the tyranny of the dead, and in so doing have called for innovation and insight in place of tradition.”

And we know all too well that when someone tries to take something away from us that our tendency is to hang onto it even more tightly – especially if we think the thing is valuable

If we’re like Tevye and see tradition as the thing that gives our lives shape and significance and security even when we can no longer remember how the tradition got started we will cling to it like grim death when someone tries to change it

And what may have once been a noble and worthwhile tradition will morph into traditionalism as the tradition becomes more important than the underlying reason for it and we will be following tradition simply for the sake of tradition

### ***Modern tradition***

The situation is further complicated and degraded when we substitute the true Christian traditions handed down over the ages for a more modern version

We all have preferences and those preferences are largely generational and what many believers mean when they speak of tradition is their own generational definition of what is proper – which is, in turn, largely based on what makes them comfortable

We see this very clearly when we consider what each of us thinks is proper regarding worship

If we were to take a poll we would find that each of us has an affinity for a particular style of music that we would prefer be used on Sunday morning and there is nothing surprising about that

What is kind of interesting though is that our individual definition of what should be considered “traditional” or “proper” worship would be closely tied to our particular taste or perhaps what we’ve become accustomed to

I was raised on hymns

More specifically, I was raised on three hymns per service and singing verses 1, 2, and 4 of those hymns

I always felt kind of bad for poor verse 3 because we never sang verse 3

So when the praise choruses began to be introduced into the morning worship service not so many years ago, I internally rebelled against what I considered to be “religious jingles” that lacked the gravitas of the hymns

They broke with my idea of what was and forevermore should be tradition – how dare they!

For you it may be worship but something completely different but we all have our ideas about what constitutes proper “tradition” both in the life of the church and the life of the believer

**But largely what we refer to as tradition and fight to protect or rebel against is nothing more than our preference or the preference of a prior generation that has nothing to do with the Christian tradition the Bible tells us to preserve**

In Matthew 15 it was hand washing for the Pharisees and scribes and the disciples were violating tradition

And we may well wonder why this was an issue at all – after all, it makes sense to wash before eating and as parents we try to instill that habit in our children at an early age

But this hand washing had nothing to do with hygiene but everything to do with ceremony

The Jewish elders had long ago established very strict and rigid rules regarding washing before meals and the fact that Jesus’ disciples didn’t observe the ritual of pouring cool water twice over each hand in turn and reciting the required words of blessing afterwards was offensive to the religious leaders of the day because they took those rules so seriously

In fact, one rabbi went so far as to write in the Talmud, the writings that teach about the Law, that failing to wash one’s hands before eating was tantamount to having sex with a prostitute

## II. Danger: Discretionary becoming Doctrine

We tend to think of the Pharisees as the “bad guys” because they were so often at odds with Jesus but in actuality we likely would have had a very different opinion of them if we had lived alongside them

In fact, I think we would hold the Pharisees and scribes in high esteem just as we do certain Christian leaders and teachers today without what we read about them in the gospels

They were the sincerely devout among the people of Israel and they really were seeking to do well in honoring God

And in our passage a delegation from Jerusalem has travelled north to the region of Galilee, which was where Jesus had been ministering, in order to conduct an investigation and in order to evaluate what he was teaching and doing

We have no reason to think that their question was born of anything more than surprise and bewilderment at the disciple’s lack of concern for established ritual but after Jesus answers; their interest will turn to offense

Rather than answer their question directly, Jesus answered with a question of his own that exposed the error of the thinking and practice of the Pharisees

And Jesus’ question reveals to us the **danger** in the **discretionary** becoming **doctrine**

Because when that happens God’s truth gets replaced by human tradition and our focus turns to external compliance with rules and rituals rather than internal conformity with God’s will

Look with me at **Matthew 15:3-9** where we see Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees and scribes –

*He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”*

*For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me is given to God,” he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:*

*“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*

There was nothing inherently wrong with the hand-washing ritual except for the fact that the Pharisees were declaring that anyone who failed to honor the tradition was thereby opposing God

And this was after openly admitting that the disciples had only broken the tradition of the elders and not God’s law

So Jesus turned the matter around on the Pharisees and said that they were guilty of breaking God’s law by following their traditions

And he used the example of the practice of Corban to avoid giving honor to one’s parents to illustrate this truth

The Pharisees would have the Ten Commandments memorized and knew very well that number five on the list was the command to honor one’s father and mother

They also knew about the command to give back to God in proportion to how he had blessed them and the law of the tithe

So they cleverly devised a way that a man could make a vow to give his property or their savings to God in order to avoid using it to help his parents – in fact declaring a thing to be corban made it illegal for him to use it to help his parents

And the loophole was that the person making the vow didn’t have to actually give up the thing vowed and so the Pharisees had devised a way to keep their wealth while defrauding their parents

Just as there was nothing inherently wrong with washing one’s hands before eating there was also nothing wrong with promising to give an asset to God except for the fact that the Pharisees were using a good thing in a way that caused them to disobey a clear command of God

**The Pharisees commitment to hollow tradition caused them to miss out on what God would have them do and the blessings that obedience brings**

## **And their focus on tradition caused them to block those who failed to live up to their rules from access to God**

The rules and traditions that began as a hedge around the law were intended to be good and helpful but they became standards by which to judge others and to get around biblical measures of spiritual fidelity

And ever since, throughout the church's history, we have fought over various traditions which has led to a great deal of disunity within and between various groups of believers along with excommunications and church splits over traditions

Here's a little story told by a comedian that shows just how divisive tradition can be – He said –

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

### **Tradition!**

#### ***Salvation by tradition?***

We need to exercise care not to fall into the trap of honoring deceptive tradition

Because we can also be guilty of devoting ourselves to **ritual without real relationship** and **ritual that doesn't lead to righteousness**

And if we're like Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof we can find ourselves engaging in and clinging to tradition just to keep our balance and considering ourselves successful as we faithfully do things that God doesn't require

And that can have disastrous results as we either beat ourselves up over our failure to fully participate in some activity or another or we can begin to believe that our faithful fulfillment of them endears us to God

We might even believe that they are the means to our salvation

I have been surprised and more than a little dismayed over the years when I asked people, many of them self-professed Christians, why they believe they will be in heaven when they die only to hear them answer with some form of "I think (or I hope) I've been good enough"

And during my study this week I came across a survey from the Barna Group that reported that only 63% of self-professed Christians said they would go to heaven when they died because they had confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior – meaning 37% of professing believers have a wrong view of salvation!

13% believed they would be in heaven because of their own good works, another 7% said they would be in heaven because God loves people too much to condemn them, and 15% said they weren't sure what would happen

And it's very troubling that 2% said they knew they would not be in heaven

So in reality works and fidelity to some code of conduct was the way 37% of people claiming to be Christians saw as the way to heaven – nearly four out of ten believe God will bless them with eternal life because of what they do

Christians are constantly tempted to start to trust in themselves and their works for salvation and that's one reason we can become so attached to our traditions

If we believe that we are saved by what you have done you will become very protective of your methods, customs, and habits because to change those things is to mess with your ticket to heaven

Without vigilance we might find that we are also guilty of honoring God with our lips while our hearts are far from him

### III. Determine: Tradition or Truth

That leaves us in a bit of a quandary about tradition and its place in the life of the believer and the church

After all, we've seen that tradition can be helpful as we use it to inform and encourage us

But we've also seen that tradition can turn into traditionalism and lead us astray if we're not careful

Look with me again at [Matthew 15:9](#) where we see a clue as to how to rightly handle tradition when Jesus quoting from Isaiah said –

*“In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*

This shows us that we must understand the difference between tradition and doctrine and then determine whether a practice is **tradition** or **truth**

Jesus warned his disciples in [verses 12-14](#) that only that which is of God, or truth, will last

*Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”*

We must inspect our traditions to see if they are found in or based on the Word of God and if they aren't we dare not turn them into commandments for ourselves or for others

Because no teaching or practice, no matter how noble and well-intentioned it is; no matter how practical or sensible it seems, will last if it isn't firmly rooted in the Word of God

#### ***Style vs substance***

Much of what we do here at Brick Church is simply a matter of tradition and there is nothing necessarily wrong with that Tradition is valuable for assuring continuity in the church but we have to be sure that every tradition is Bible-based and that we aren't simply venerating and perpetuating the preferences of a previous generation, or even our own generation, simply because they make us feel good

We will remain on safe ground just as long as we recognize that many traditions aren't meant to last and as long as we hold onto them loosely and remain open to changing them when it becomes prudent to do so

We often speak of message and method and we state with utmost conviction that the message can never change but we must also realize that our methods must always be subject to change

Because the church that changes the substance of the gospel will find it has nothing relevant to share with the unsaved world even if it does so using the most culturally relevant means

And the church that refuses to change stylistically will soon find they have become irrelevant in the midst of a culture that never stops changing because even if their message remains sound no one will hear it

And the result for both will be the failure of both to fulfill their mission of making disciples

#### ***Vain traditions***

The Pharisees were actually very sincere, upstanding people who were careful to practice all the religious traditions that had been established as a means of protecting the Law – they were trying to do well

But Jesus had to tell them that what Isaiah had said long ago was true of them –

*“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*

All of their tradition keeping added up to nothing because their hearts were actually far from God and it was all for show

And all of our keeping of tradition is worthless if it is mere externalism done to prove to others, or even possibly to ourselves, what good Christians we must surely be

We can also be guilty of ritual without relationship having our hearts remain far from God even as we practice our cultural traditions religiously

Far too many Christians have been made to feel inadequate because they failed to keep our modern-day traditions with the fervor of a Pharisee –

Traditions that may be well-intentioned and even very good practices but which are found nowhere in Scripture

### ***Unbelievers***

And when our well-intentioned traditions make God seem antiquated and irrelevant to those who are outside the church, we will find ourselves also guilty of breaking the commandment of God for the sake of our tradition

Because we have been commanded to make disciples we dare not allow our cultural habits to become a barrier to those we are trying to reach

But even worse perhaps would be to cause unbelievers to look at external conformance to some set of traditions as the means of salvation

For then we will be the “blind guides” Jesus speaks of in **verse 14** that will cause others who are blind to “fall into a pit”

We must guard against giving anyone the impression that dressing a certain way, or listening to a particular genre of music, or having a daily quiet time, or any number of traditions that we cling to can make one right with God

All of those things may well be good and even godly things but they are also secondary things and we need to be sure that we aren’t elevating them over what God requires – which is our hearts

Because in the end those things have just as much relevance when it comes to being reconciled to God as pouring water over each hand in turn and saying a prescribed blessing before eating

## Conclusion

### Tradition!

Is both good and bad; both a help and a hindrance, depending on how we handle it

It's beneficial when it comes from a biblical basis as we look at the living faith of those who have gone before us but it's a hindrance when we elevate our own cultural preferences above what they deserve

Let's face it, that's really what a lot of tradition is – cultural habits that are engaged in without a whole lot of thought simply because we've always done it that way and the familiar makes us feel comfortable

And when we recognize tradition for what it is we are better able to deal with it by thanking God for it where it is helpful and asking him to help us change it where it isn't

After all, tradition is necessary in that it helps provide us with stability in our constantly changing world and provides us with an identity to show the lost that is different from yet sensitive to our culture

And reaching the lost is what's important to God – and it's our mission

That's an excellent thing for us to remember as we put our traditions under the microscope and decide what to keep and what to let go as we strive to complete our mission

Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof was under the impression that tradition “let everyone know who he is and what God expects from him” but he found out that the traditions he clung to ultimately led him to forget God's commandments to love not only him but also to love one another and to forgive one another

What Tevye found out too late was that tradition may well reveal who we are but only tradition that is based on God's Word lets us know what God expects from us as we relate to him and to our fellow man

We need to remember that our traditions are temporary and will one day pass away but people are eternal and they will one day face eternity either with Lord or apart from him

And as Bill Hybels put it – “You have never looked eyes with someone who doesn't matter to God”

We must endeavor to view those things that are temporary as discretionary and subject to change if it will make us more effective

But the gospel message is eternal and never changes and we still have that message to proclaim to all – and that's the one “tradition” that we should never seek to change

Let's pray