

On The Traditions Of Men

An Exegetical Examination of Matthew 15:1-9

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When I was a teenager, my friends and I had a tradition that we held most sacred. It required that all the male members of our “inner circle” descend on the home of one of our male comrades who was experiencing a rite of passage that required witnesses, examination, discussion, and occasionally some heated debate. Females were not required nor desired at the gathering, as they would only serve to undermine the reverence of the occasion, and were unlikely to appreciate the full meaning of the tradition. The event in question was one that most young men and women in North America experience: Owning your first car. When a dear brother finally acquired this mighty treasure, boyfriends would leave girlfriends behind, draw together those who were not blessed with transportation, purchase the necessary elements required for the ceremony (*Tim Horton's*[®] coffee and *Timbits*[®]), and congregate around the new acquisition. Each individual walked slowly around the vehicle, measuring its worth, admiring its nuances, and prophesying its potential until, one by one, each young man stood before the vehicle staring between the headlights. Sooner or later, one would lead us to the most holy point in the sacrament, entering the Holy of Holies if you will, by declaring, “Let’s take a look under the hood!”

The focus of this paper is a relatively brief encounter Jesus has with the Jewish authorities as recorded in Matthew’s gospel in the fifteenth chapter. Jesus, when questioned about his disciples’ alleged transgression of Jewish tradition, responds with a question about their transgression of Jewish law, thusly turning the tables on these religious authorities, as well as asserting his own jurisdiction in religious matters. We will attempt to exegete the passage through the text itself, as well as examine the larger historical context. Who were the Pharisees? What was this tradition Jesus speaks of? Was Jesus’ judgement rightly applied? Unfortunately, due to the constraints of this brief paper, the author is required to make certain assumptions concerning foundational issues.

The author assumes that...

- i. ...the reader is aware of the basic story of the New and Old Testaments as laid out in the Bible.¹
- ii. ...the reader recognizes that Jesus of Nazareth was a genuine historical figure during the first century.
- iii. ...the reader is aware that Jesus was not a “Christian,” but a Palestinian Jew.

Regarding my third assumption, it is necessary to point out that, since Jesus cannot be his own disciple, he cannot be a “Christian,” and he most certainly was not a Christian in the Western sense. Jesus was born to a good Jewish family, raised in the nurture and admonition of the Jewish faith, and dedicated his adult ministry to the Jewish people. Omitting the issue of Jesus’ deity², had he chosen to minister in, say, downtown Rome, rather than Jerusalem, he likely would have failed miserably since he shared little in common with the Roman people, their society and culture. Jesus came to minister to the “lost sheep of Israel,” not to the Gentiles, and commanded his disciples to do the same.³ With these foundations and assumptions in mind, let us now take a closer look at the context surrounding the pericope we will be discussing. Let us gather together and “take a look under the hood” of this passage that we may better understand what it means, how it was understood by the first century reader, and what principles we may extract from it today. In doing so, we must first look at the author of the work in question.

The author of the gospel according to Matthew⁴ goes to great pains to construct an organized picture of the public ministry of Jesus. While the other Gospel writers initiate their accounts with introductory prologues that clearly lay out their purpose in writing, Matthew does not. Instead, he introduces his Gospel in the very same way the Old Testament writers introduced key players in the story of God’s relationship with his

¹ While this author is Protestant, and will therefore be utilizing the Protestant canon of scripture, the Roman Catholic canon, with its additional Old Testament books, does not affect the basic story of the Bible.

² While this author confesses the deity of Christ in the Nicene, Trinitarian sense, this writing does not address that issue, nor require the assumption of Jesus’ deity.

³ Matthew 10:5-7

⁴ We shall henceforth assume the author to be Matthew the tax collector, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. The discussion as to whether or not authorship is correctly attributed to Matthew is beyond the scope of this paper.

people. The Pentateuch introduces each major biblical figure with an introductory genealogy, as if to present a proper pedigree that will establish the authority for the individual in question. In the book of Genesis alone, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob are all introduced with this type of genealogical pedigree⁵ which, by tracing their genealogy back to Adam, establishes them as the special creation of God. This manner of introducing Jesus speaks clearly of a Hebrew author, well-versed in the traditions of his people and establishes the indented audience for his account of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

The author's heritage is likely one of the key reasons he spends so much time discussing the Jewish leaders and their encounters with Jesus, paying special attention to the Pharisees. Jesus, as recorded by Matthew, figuratively bashes away at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, through both the use of parables, and outright condemnation, achieving its climax in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew's gospel which is dedicated entirely to the public condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees, accusing them of the most foul hypocrisies. Jesus speaks of how they seek the respect and honour of men through the appearance of holiness, but are selfish, greedy, and deceitful, cutting their disciples off from God's truth and His mercy. Perhaps Matthew's desire to discuss Jesus' dealings with this sect is best understood in the introduction to this diatribe in Matthew 23:2-4:

The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*. "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with *so much as a finger*."⁶

Imagine being a diligent Jew, working tirelessly to fulfill the requirements of the Law as laid out by the Pharisees, only to watch them transgressing the Law themselves. Matthew was likely frustrated with their hypocrisy, and therefore desired to paint a very vivid

⁵ These genealogies can be found as follow: Noah - Genesis 5:1-28, Abraham (Abram) – Genesis 11:10-26, Jacob (Israel) – Genesis 25:1-26

⁶ Matthew 23:2-4 (*New American Standard Bible*, 1995 Update, henceforth NASB)

picture of their ungodliness. “Do what they say, not what they do,” is the advice Jesus offers his listeners, and Matthew desired to make that clearly understood.

The Pharisees themselves are a bit of a mystery, and their origins are still debated by both Christian and Jewish scholars. Since there is no mention of the sect in the Old Testament, it is clear that they developed at some point during the intertestamental period, possibly emerging out of the Maccabean Revolt (165 B.C).⁷ Their influence in both religious and political matters grew steadily over the following century, cementing their role in Jewish Society. As the late Prof. Anthony Saldarini⁸ comments:

“Lenski’s analysis of agrarian empires discerns nine significant classes, five belonging to the upper class, and four to the lower. The upper classes are the ruler (a class in himself), the governing class, retainer class, merchant class, and priestly class. [...]

The Pharisees fit best into the retainer class as a religious group and a political force which interacted with the governing class, often influenced society and sometimes gained power.”⁹

Outside of the Gospel accounts, the most prominent ancient source of information about the Pharisees and other Jewish sects is unquestionably the writings of the Jewish historian, Josephus. In book II of Jewish Wars, Josephus offers the following description of the Pharisees:

“But then as to the two other orders at first mentioned, the Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skilful in the exact explanation of their laws, and introduce the first sect. These ascribe all to fate [or providence], and to God, and yet allow, that to act what is right, or the contrary, is principally in the power of men, although fate does co-operate in every action. They say that all souls are

⁷ *New International Bible Dictionary*, p. 778

⁸ As a point of interest, Saldarini was a Roman Catholic scholar who was committed to reconciliation between Jews and Christians, and prominent author in the field of Rabbinic Judaism. He passed away September 16, 2001.

⁹ *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society*, p.39

incorruptible; but that the souls of good men only are moved into other bodies,-- but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment. [...] Moreover, the Pharisees are friendly to one another, and are for the exercise of concord, and regard for the public;”¹⁰

Christian eyes may desire to doubt Josephus’ praise of the Pharisees, but we must not be too quick to judge Josephus through a Christian filter. What Josephus describes is in perfect accord with Matthew’s account, though the Pharisees righteousness he sees only as a façade, a colourful mask that conceals a darker selfishness. It is within this sociological context, confronted with a popular, vocal religious group who often seemed more concerned with influence than integrity, that we approach the section of Matthew’s gospel that is the subject of this paper.

Let us now look to the 15th chapter of Matthew’s gospel, which takes place after two important faith-testing miracles, namely the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on the water. It is not by accident that Matthew mentions these two important miracles at this point in time. Matthew 14 opens with the execution of John the baptizer, a popular and influential religious voice in Judea, and these miracles serve to firmly establish that Jesus is mightier than John, as John himself prophesied in Matthew 3:11. This death of a major charismatic religious figure, followed by the miraculous reinforcement of Jesus’ ministry, serves as the perfect foundation for this first direct discussion of the Pharisees authority. Prior encounters were gracious by comparison¹¹, but Jesus now attacks a vital area, the very foundation of the Pharisees power and authority, namely the sacred traditions of the Jews:

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." And He answered and said to them, "Why do you

¹⁰ Jewish War, Book II, 8:14 - *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, p.739

¹¹ The prior encounters were generally short and sweet, with little discussion, and no direct condemnation. Compare the brief encounters in Matthew 9:11, 9:33-34, 12:1-8, 12:22-29, and 12:38-45 to that in Matthew 15.

yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?
 "For God said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,' and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.'
 "But you say, 'Whoever says to *his* father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given *to God*," he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And *by this* you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. "You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: '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.'"¹²

While this brief discourse falls within a larger discussion about that which defiles a man (Matthew 15:1-20), the first nine verses of this chapter bring up an interesting conflict between God's law and the traditions of the Pharisees. As we've already read in Josephus' comments, the Pharisees were well versed in matters of the law, so it seems unlikely that a young Nazarene upstart would have the capacity to offer correction in matters of Mosaic law, and yet that is exactly what Jesus did.

The law in question is the fourth of the ten commandments given to Moses by God, the first ten laws taught to the children of Israel: "Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you."¹³ (Exodus 20:12) According to Jesus, the Pharisees utilized a tradition to undermine this commandment in such a way as to deny their parents honour. What was this tradition, and how was it used to dishonour one's parents?

Thankfully, while only one gospel account may have been necessary, God saw fit to provide us with four, each bringing a unique perspective and offering various points of illumination. Instead of looking to the story of Jesus with a single flashlight in the dark

¹² Matthew 15:1-9 (NASB)

¹³ It is interesting to note that the "Ten Commandments" are in two sections, the first addressing man's relationship with God, and the second addressing man's relationships with man, and the command to honour one's parents takes precedent even before the condemnation of murder.

annals of history, we are provided with multiple floodlights, that we may clearly see what God would have us know. While Luke and John do not record this particular dialogue, Mark offers the following description:

The Pharisees and the scribes asked Him, "Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with impure hands?" And He said to them, "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: '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.' "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. "For Moses said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER'; and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER, IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH'; but you say, 'If a man says to *his* father or *his* mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given *to God*),' you no longer permit him to do anything for *his* father or *his* mother; *thus* invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that."¹⁴

Mark contains considerably more text than Matthew on this discourse, but it is mildly redundant and, at times, almost rambling (e.g. "and you do many things such as that"), so it is quite possible that Matthew simply smoothed out Mark's account. It is interesting, however, that Mark uses the proper Hebrew term "*Corban*" (also '*korban*' or '*qorban*'¹⁵), while Matthew doesn't. Most biblical scholars subscribe to the theory that Mark was written to Romans, while Matthew addresses the Jewish people. One of the key evidences associated with this theory is Mark's avoidance of Aramaisms, in contrast to Matthew's use of them. This is clearly either an exception, or Mark's attempt to

¹⁴ Mark 7:5-13 (NASB)

¹⁵ As with all attempts to transliterate other languages to Roman characters, there is great diversity in conventions. Therefore, we shall use the words *corban*, *korban*, and *qorban* interchangeably, generally in harmony with whatever convention the most immediate citation utilizes.

familiarize his audience with common Jewish religious terminology. Unfortunately, the study of that issue falls outside of the intended scope of this paper. Mark does, however, make it clear that the tradition in question, often called “*the Corban rule*,” somehow denies assistance to one’s parents when they are in need. Moreover, Jesus says that this is only one example of “many things” the Pharisees do that may have the same results, that is, nullifying the word of God.

It is no wonder that Matthew desired to add this story to his account, since it provides the perfect “dot-connector” between a Greek term which Matthew has already used several times in his Gospel. The Greek word ὑποκριτής (*hupokrites* translated ‘hypocrites’) is used on several occasions of those religious people who give, pray, and fast to purchase the honour of men¹⁶ throughout Matthew’s gospel, but he never identifies who precisely the *hupokrites* are. Here in chapter 15, however, the word is used to draw a clear connection between all the previous condemnations, and the Pharisees now confronting Jesus. Eminent Dutch biblical scholar, the late Dr. Sjef van Tilborg comments:

This periscope deals with the contrast between the commandment of God and ‘your tradition’. The Pharisees and the scribes have no right to speak¹⁷, for they are the hypocrites who avow God’s commandment with their lips, but actually consider the human tradition to be higher. In the word ὑποκριταί everything is summarized: God’s Law is broken by them and rendered inoperative; their tradition goes directly against what God wishes. One should not listen to what they have to say for they violate the word of God. The concept of ὑποκριτής, found in Mt 15, 7 [*sic*], has been borrowed from Mk 7, 6 [*sic*], but it has been given the content it has in Mt 23, 13-33 [*sic*]. The Jewish leaders are ὑποκριτής because they go against the Law of God.¹⁸

¹⁶ See Matthew 7:5, 6:2, 6:5, and 6:16

¹⁷ John Chrysostom speaks to this as well in writing, “But mark, I pray thee, how even by the question itself they are convicted; in not saying, “Why do they transgress the law of Moses,” but, “the tradition of the elders.” Whence it is evident that the priests were inventing many novelties, although Moses, with much terror and with much threatening, had enjoined neither to add nor take away” (Homilies On Matthew 51:1)

¹⁸ *The Jewish Leaders in Matthew*, p. 15

The ancient use of the word ὑποκριτής brings to mind different images than it does today, as we are used to the term “hypocrite” being used solely of someone who doesn’t practice what they preach. In Classical Greek and Roman culture, however, it was a word used primarily in the entertainment industry, applied to theatrical actors¹⁹ who would appear on stage in intricate masks that not only concealed the actor’s identity, but served to amplify his voice. The mask itself was called a “*persona*” in Latin, derived from the Greek word πρόσωπον (*prosopon*, meaning “face”), thus we use the Latin term today to describe a projected social façade. In this context, the Pharisees seem less like self-contradictory leaders, and more like buffoonish play-actors, strutting and fretting their hour upon the stage²⁰, at the expense of those who would lend an ear.

What, then, of this “corban rule?” Is the tradition itself contrary to the Law of God, or are there only under certain conditions? It is unlikely that Jesus was condemning *corban* as a whole, since the Hebrew word, קָרְבָּן (*qorban*) simply refers to an offering to God. According to the laws as laid out in the book of Leviticus, burnt offerings (עֹלָה, *olah*), offerings by fire (אִשְׁשֶׁה, *ishsheh*) and other gifts (מִנְחָה, *minchah*) are all various types or categories of *qorban*.²¹ Matthew has already recorded Jesus intent to fulfill the law, rather than abolish it²², so it is extremely unlikely that Jesus was attempting to undermine the validity of the Levitical offerings as a whole, and was likely addressing a particular misuse of the Law, in the same he addressed the misuse of gifts, prayer and fasting previously.

The word *qorban* itself only appears in three books of the Old Testament (Leviticus, Numbers, and one verse in Nehemiah²³), so we must look to extra Biblical

¹⁹ “*Hypocrites*, literally ‘answerer’, was the standard word for actor, and *hupokrisis* was also used to mean non-theatrical rhetorical debate.” (*The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, p.14)

²⁰ While we should be well beyond having to offer Shakespeare citations in an unrelated paper, I won’t take the chance. The quote is from *Macbeth*, Act V, scene 5. Arguably, I’m also quoting from *Julius Caesar*, Act III, scene 2 with the phrase “lend an ear.”

²¹ Leviticus, Chapters 1 through 7 all deal with the various types of offerings and their applications

²² Matthew 5:17

²³ Nehemiah 10:34 or 35 depending on bible version, since the Hebrew bible numbers the verses differently than most English bibles

texts to get a better sense of how it was used in the traditions of the Pharisees. Josephus lends little help in this regard, as he makes only fleeting references reference to *qorban*, the most relevant being a brief reference in *Against Apion*:

This is declared by Theophrastus, in his writings concerning laws; for he says that “the laws of the Tyrians forbid men to swear foreign oaths.” Among which he enumerates some others, and particularly that called *corban*: which oath can only be found among the Jews, and declares what a man may call “A thing devoted to God.”²⁴

The Mishnah, the written record of the very oral traditions the Pharisees defended, does offer some illumination on the subject by describing *qorban* as property, material objects vowed as gifts to God. The first chapter of *Nedarim* discusses the application of *qorban* as a vow:

If a man said to his fellow, *Konam* or *Konah* or *Konas*, these are substitutes for *Korban*, an Offering. [...] If a man said, ‘May what I eat of thine be a Whole-offering’, or ‘a Meal-offering’, or ‘a Sin-offering’, or ‘a Thank-offering’, or ‘a Peace-offering’, it is forbidden to him. But R. [Rabbi] Judah permits it. If a man said, ‘May what I eat of thine be the *Korban*’, or ‘as a *Korban*’, or ‘a *Korban*’, R. Meir declares it forbidden.²⁵

Despite the fact that the Mishnah is a 2nd century document, we are given no reason to believe that such was not the view in Jesus’ day. The Mishnah speaks at great length concerning vows and oaths²⁶, and the various application, formulas and exceptions therein²⁷, but it is clear that the declaration of *Korban* was considered the most solemn of

²⁴ Against Apion, Book I, 22 (167) - *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, p.947

²⁵ Nedarim 1:2,4 (Danby, *The Mishnah*, p.264)

²⁶ Vows, in Mishnaic context, refer to the forbidding the use of a particular item, which is generally forbidden by either law or tradition, such as “Let these idols be forbidden to us!” An oath, on the other hand, only restricts the swearer of the particular thing, whether that thing is forbidden or not, such as an oath against eating figs.

²⁷ Certain oaths and vows made under certain conditions were not binding, or were open for an appeal to the elders.

oaths, since it was a promise of something to God Himself. The Mishnah, however, speaks primarily of vows that forbid something to the speaker of the vow, but Jesus is more concerned with a vow made that affects a third party²⁸, specifically one's parents. For centuries, scholars made certain assumptions about Matthew 15:5 and Mark 7:11 based on the text itself and its description of the practice in question. Unfortunately, this evidence isn't compelling to those who take issue with the accuracy of Matthew's account, or accuse Matthew and Mark of anti-Semitism, the raving rebellion of two Jewish ne'er-do-wells who wanted to paint a rosy picture of their new super-rabbi²⁹. Was the declaration of *korban* ever used to deny third parties benefit of the oath-taker's belongings? The Mishnah only vaguely implies such third-party application of *korban*, and only in binding a third-party to a vow:

If one said to another, 'Lend me your cow', and the other answered, 'It is not at liberty', and he said, '*Konam!*³⁰ if I ever again plow my field with it', if he himself was wont to plough, the vow is binding on him but not on others; but if he himself was not wont to plough, the vow is binding on himself and on all others.³¹

This does not, however, speak to denying a third party property or belongings based on the identification of such items as offerings or gifts to God, but merely declaring something mutually forbidden which has already been vowed forbidden.

New light was shed on this text in the 1950s when a first century ossuary of a Jewish male was unearthed in Jerusalem. Prominent Qumran scholar, Fr. Joseph Milik, a member of the original Dead Sea Scrolls translation team, published the find in *Studia*

²⁸ In the case of *korban* vows, the first party is the oath-taker, and the second party is God who is the recipient of the gift vowed.

²⁹ Jewish scholar J.H.A. Hart, on the other hand, accepted Matthew and Mark's account, but interpreted it in an entirely different light, seeing Jesus statements almost as praise to the Pharisees: "*Here, however, there is no denunciation; only a statement of fact. Tradition conflicts with the Law. What of that? In the exercise of the authority committed to them, the Scribes, like Jesus himself, were ready to repeal what was said to them of old. Had not the Psalmist set aside the whole system of sacrifices?*" (*The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4., pp. 635-636)

³⁰ *Konam* may be used as a substitute for *Korban*. See citation in footnote 21.

³¹ Nedarim 4:6

Biblici Franciscani Liber Annuus in 1956. Jesuit scholar, Joseph Fitzmyer of John Hopkins University, later made corrections to Milik's work and published an English translation in *The Journal of Biblical Liturature*. Fitzmyer's translation is presented here:

“All that a man may find-to-his-profit in this ossuary (is) an offering to God
[קרבן, *qorban*] from him who is within it.”³²

This use of *qorban* to identify the ossuary's contents as offerings to God almost harkens to the Egyptian use of curses against those who would violate a sacred tomb. This inscription is clear evidence that the declaration of *qorban* could be utilized to deny a third-party benefit of personal belongings, even after death. Fitzmyer also went on to demonstrate that the grammar of the inscription so closely parallels Mark's use that it demonstrates a well known, contemporary formula of this application of *qorban*.³³

This leads us to the second issue in mapping the alleged transgression of the Pharisees: How does the declaration of *Corban*, as described in Matthew and Mark, transgress the 4th Commandment? Does forbidding one's parents to benefit from a gift to God necessarily deny honour to them? In order to answer these questions, we must first determine what obligation, if any, a Jewish male had to care for his parents. The Old Testament speaks clearly of the honour and respect due to one's parents³⁴, but relatively little of the obligation to provide for parents in need. While there are no explicit commands of Torah to provide for one's parents, there are several Old Testament examples of such traditions.

While the man after God's own heart³⁵, David was fleeing from the persecution of Saul, he took refuge in the cave(s) of Adullam, which became the stronghold of those

³² *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 78, No. 1. (Mar., 1959), p.62

³³ Fitzmeyer concludes his article with, “In it [the ossuary inscription] we have a concrete example of how the formula was used. The new inscription does not alter the sense of the word in Matthew or Mark but provides a perfect contemporary parallel.”

³⁴ See Deut 26:16, Pro 6:20, Pro 20:20, Pro 30:11

³⁵ 1 Samuel 13:14

who allied themselves to him. Shortly thereafter, David paid a visit to the king of Moab in the nearby town of Mizpah, petitioning for the safety of his parents:

“Please let my father and my mother come *and stay* with you until I know what God will do for me.” Then he left them with the king of Moab; and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold.”³⁶

David’s concern for his parents may have been for fear that they would suffer the wrath of Saul, or perhaps he simply didn’t want his parents living in the caves with him, but regardless of either, his action is no less noteworthy. We have here an impoverished refugee petitioning the local monarch, not that he might bring his parents into the region so he could care for them in Adullam, but that the *king himself* would care and provide for them. Obviously David honoured his parents deeply, and desired not only their safety, but their comfort as well. David’s honour for his parents certainly reflected in the honour his son, Solomon, gave to Bathsheba³⁷, his mother and echoed in his proverbs:

Listen to your father who begot you, And do not despise your mother when she is old. Buy truth, and do not sell *it*, *Get* wisdom and instruction and understanding. The father of the righteous will greatly rejoice, And he who sires a wise son will be glad in him. Let your father and your mother be glad, And let her rejoice who gave birth to you. Give me your heart, my son, And let your eyes delight in my ways.³⁸

No doubt David’s parents were glad for their son’s care, and rejoiced in both the safety and comfort of the king’s hospitality, thanks to the petition of their homeless refugee-child.

³⁶ 1 Samuel 22:3-4

³⁷ 1 Kings 2:19 “*So Bathsheba went to King Solomon to speak to him for Adonijah. And the king arose to meet her, bowed before her, and sat on his throne; then he had a throne set for the king's mother, and she sat on his right.*”

³⁸ Proverbs 23:22-26

Though the Talmud, especially the Babylonian Talmud³⁹, is far removed from the New Testament period, it at least gives us a clue to the evolution of tradition. Kiddushin 31b teaches, “What is the reverence [due to parents]? Reverence means that a child must not sit or stand in his parent’s place, nor contradict his words, nor tip the scale against him. Honor means that the child must provide the parent with food and drink, clothe and cover him, and lead him in and out [in his old age or infirmity].”⁴⁰ When we consider even such distant written tradition within the larger context of Old Testament example, and the record of Matthew and Mark, the obligation of a Jew to his parents becomes abundantly clear.

Let us again look to the text of Matthew, and see what it would speak to us regarding these things we have examined:

"For God said, 'HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER,' and, 'HE WHO SPEAKS EVIL OF FATHER OR MOTHER IS TO BE PUT TO DEATH.'

"But you say, 'Whoever says to *his* father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given *to God*," he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And *by this* you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition."⁴¹

Note that it is not the Pharisees who are making the vow, but they are responsible for both expounding and interpreting the vow. Mark’s account sheds even further light in recording, “If a man says to *his* father or *his* mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given *to God*),’ you no longer permit him to do anything for *his* father or *his* mother.”⁴² Not only do the Pharisees expound and interpret the traditions of the elders, but according to Mark’s account, they actually enforce the vows made by those under their authority! Both accounts are in perfect harmony with the traditions concerning vows and oaths contained within the Mishnah. Whether a vow was binding

³⁹ The text of the Babylonian Talmud did not achieve its final form until the late 7th century and the first codification did not occur until the 12th century (*Jews, God, and History*, p.162)

⁴⁰ *Practical Parenting: A Jewish Perspective*, p.197

⁴¹ Matthew 15:4-6

⁴² Mark 7:11

was determined by the interpretation of the rabbis, the teachers of the Law, and it is clear that the Pharisees considered this particular vow binding. While some scholars believe they did so out of greed, it is a moot point. Jesus isn't discussing the property or items themselves, nor is he discussing the maker of the vow. Jesus is condemning the poor judgment of the Pharisees in enforcing a vow that should be broken when one's parents are in need. From Jesus' perspective, God does not desire an offering that transgresses His law – such is tantamount to opening a brothel to fund Christian mission work.

While the tradition of vowing a gift or offering to God is not, in and of itself, contrary to the law of God – in fact, it's in perfect harmony with God's law – enforcing a religious traditions in such a way that a vow would undermine God's intention is not only hypocritical, but blasphemous and fitting the death penalty, according to Torah. The Pharisees certainly would have known the implication, especially in light of Jesus reference to the death penalty in Exodus 21:17. One can only imagine their rage when Jesus' condemnations culminated in the woes declared against the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23. It is no wonder, then, that the Pharisees desired His death.

How do Jesus words apply to religious leaders today? Protestants have often pointed the finger at Rome for holding to traditions that usurp God's authority, but do we not harbour our own traditions? Where, then, is the dividing line that whether a tradition is good or evil? Can such a line be drawn? Are all the traditions of men to be disposed of to prevent even the possibility of conflict? Again, as we examine Christ's words, note that he does not explicitly condemn the original tradition that the Pharisees brought to bear on his disciples. Though Jesus made use of the tradition of washing their hands prior to partaking of bread to demonstrate that it is not dirty bread that defiles the inner-being, he did not express disapproval of the practice itself. Rather, Jesus turned the tables on the Pharisees to undermine their authority to render judgment in the matter. In this same light, how is a common Christian tradition, such as the celebration of Christmas – a celebration that has no Biblical foundation or precedent – to be understood and weighed in light of Christ's words?

We can safely conclude that, according to Jesus, the Pharisees were in error to enforce a tradition that, when placed within a certain context, overruled the word of God. Those traditions that we, as eager disciples of Christ, hold dear to our hearts must never be so embedded that we no longer are able to hold them up, and examine them in the revealing light of God's word. While the birth of the Saviour is certainly an event worth celebrating, even the most noble traditions must be treated with care so that they do not sway from that which is glorifying to God to that which denies God His authority over His people. It is therefore necessary to always be in a position to hear God's Word, and allow His truth to shine through any traditions we may have, and though I, myself, might be tempted to declare myself innocent of harbouring traditions, I'm reminded of the words of dear friend of mine, Dr. James R. White⁴³, who once said, "He who says '*I don't have any traditions!*' is the one most enslaved to them."

⁴³ Dr. James R. White is the directory of Alpha & Omega Ministries in Phoenix, Arizona, an Elder in the Phoenix Reformed Baptist Church, the author of more than 20 books, and a critical consultant for the *New American Standard Bible Update* (1995)

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