

Authority: Divine or Human? (Mark 7:1-13)

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INTRODUCTION: The Gospel contains many accounts of Jesus' debates with the Pharisees and the Saducees. These debates were on issues that center on the very nature of true religion. Is religion natural or supernatural (Mark 12:18-27)? Is Scripture an end in itself or a means to an end (John 5:39-40)? Is salvation based on human merit or divine mercy (Luke 18:9-14)?

Three other issues surface in the debate recorded in Mark 7:1-23, where the Pharisees attack Jesus because His disciples did not keep the traditions of the elders. This was not the first time Christ had clashed with the Pharisees over such issues (cf. Mark 2:15-28). Basically it was a clash of authority. Cf. *exousia* ("authority," esp. in Matthew 21:23-27). Bone of contention between the Saducees and Pharisees (cf. Josephus quote). The Pharisees believed that there were two authoritative streams---written law and oral tradition, both equally authoritative. Eventually codified in the *Mishnah*, and then the *Gemara*. But if the Saducees took away from Scripture, the Pharisees were guilty of adding to it---both in violation of Scripture (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18-19). This is very relevant for our day. All churches, despite their differences, assign some degree of authority to the Bible---but is the Bible the *sole* authority of the church? This was the issue in Mark 7.

The background (Mark 7:1-5). Commands for purification initially given to the priests (Exodus 30:17-21; Lev. 22:1-16), but eventually expanded to include everyone, and in every meal. While this may have been a legitimate application, it lacked the authority of Scripture. *The essence of legalism is a failure to distinguish between Scripture and Scripture application.* Jesus called the Pharisees---and us---back to the Scripture, showing that Scripture has three characteristics that show it alone as providing authority for the Christian.

I. **The Source of Scripture** (v. 8). It is "from God," or to borrow Paul's expression, it is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:15-17; cf. 2 Peter 1:19-21). Thus while *Scripture is divine; tradition is human.*

- A. Note the contrast Jesus makes between the "tradition of men" (8, 9, 13) and the "commandment/word of God" (8, 9, 13), or, between what "Moses said" (v. 10; cf. Matt. 15:4 ["God said"]) and what "you say" (v. 11). Thus, while the Pharisees may see tradition and Scripture as equal, Christ drew a strong distinction between the two (cf. "but," 6, 7, 11).
- B. Cf. the use of "tradition" in Scripture (Gk. *paradosis*). Negatively, of human tradition that is fallible (Matt. 15:2, 3, 6; Mark 7:3, 5, 8, 9, 13; Gal. 1:14; Col. 2:8); Positively, of Scripture that is infallible (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6). The only "tradition" which Scripture recognizes is Scripture! (cf. 2 Timothy 2:2; the warning in Jeremiah 23).

II. **The Sufficiency of Scripture** (v. 7) Scripture stands on its own, without the addition of any binding traditions. Therefore, *Scripture is obligatory; tradition is optional.*

- A. Jesus did not reject tradition out of hand; what He did was put it in a secondary place, making it optional. This is what the Pharisees weren't doing. On the

contrary, they were teaching "as doctrines" the "precepts of men" (v. 7; quoting Isaiah 29:13). They were trying to enforce upon others what God had not prescribed.

B. Since Jesus neither justified nor rebuked His disciples' breach of human tradition, this implied that they were matters of indifference. Paul develops this more fully in his discussions on Christian liberty in the NT (Rom 14:1--15:13; 1 Cor. 8-10). Cf. "Touch not, taste not, handle not" (Col. 2:21). We have the responsibility of being "fully persuaded in our own minds" (Rom. 14:5), but then we must refrain from judging those who differ with us (Rom. 14:3, 4, 10, 13).

C. Tradition was regarded as "A Fence for Torah" Yet there are significant differences:

	Tradition	Scripture
1.	external	internal
2.	bondage	freedom
3.	rules	principles
4.	please men	please God
5.	ritual	reality
6.	replaces Scripture	exalts Scripture

D. Key issue in the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura!*

III. **The Supremacy of Scripture** (vv. 10-13). Scripture is the supreme authority by which all traditions must be judged. Therefore, while *Scripture is supreme, tradition is subordinate*.

A. Background of "Corban" (vv. 10-12). "But you" (v. 13; cf. Matt. 5:21-48). Note the progression---Scripture is first *supplemented* by tradition, then *subordinated* to it, and finally *supplanted* by it! Contrast their attitude toward Scripture with their attitude toward tradition

	Tradition	Scripture.
1.	"observe" (3, 4)	
2.	"teaching" (7)	
3.	"hold to"	"neglect" (8)
4.	"keep"	"set aside" (9)
5.	"invalidate" (13)	

B. Cf. the second and third principles placed side by side. The second: Traditions that *are not* in conflict with Scripture are permissible if optional. The third: Traditions which *are* in conflict with Scripture must be firmly rejected (cf. vv. 8, 9, 13). This is "holy disobedience"---to human tradition! Tradition must be rigorously subordinated to Scripture.

C. For the preacher, his authority is limited to and by the Scripture (cf. Titus 2:15).

CONCLUSION: What is the basis of our authority? A failure to distinguish between Scripture and tradition leads to the kind of religion the Pharisees were guilty of---one characterized by