

No One Like Jesus: Sacred Cows
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 1:11-18; Colossians 2:6-8; Matthew 15:1-20

Our final Scripture reading comes from Matthew 15:1-20. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!” Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,’ he is not to honor his father ‘with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’” Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen and understand. What goes into a man's mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him unclean.” Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?” He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” Peter said, “Explain the parable to us.” “Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. “Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man unclean. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man unclean; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him unclean.””

I'm fascinated by where we get our common phrases and idioms in English. I researched one this week: “sacred cow.” The figure of speech didn't show up until the 1890s when it was used to describe political views. A “sacred cow” is something so highly regarded that it's shocking to question it, even though common sense says questioning it is a good idea. The phrase comes from the view of cows in Hinduism, which calls the cow sacred as it represents all life – and in nearly all of India, it's illegal to eat or possess cow meat. In many places, cows are treated better than humans! And that's what makes us question it.

Judaism and Christianity know about a sacred cow too – the one the priest Aaron had built while Moses was on the mountain for forty days talking to God. The people thought Moses was dead and demanded something to worship. Aaron told the people that the golden calf was a representation of God. Yet because God had commanded His people not to make any idols, even ones representing Him, He was angered they had so quickly disobeyed. The “sacred cow” that was supposed to represent God actually went against God's nature as a spirit that cannot be represented by a cow or anything else we can make. Sacred cows, both the literal kind and the metaphorical kind, damage our relationship with God because they take His rightful place. And that's what we're going to talk about today in our passage. Jesus was very clear that our lives weren't to be lived by tradition or superstition, but by God's holy Word and God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus has done so many miracles that the big guns have come out. Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem show up. Jesus has met local followers of these religious groups, but now He's getting attention from the top. Not only does Jesus seem revolutionary, what He's teaching runs contrary to the way things have always been done. That's where this passage starts, as they confront Jesus about the actions of His disciples.

They have a problem because the disciples don't wash their hands before eating. Now we do it to avoid getting sick, but that's not what the Pharisees are mad about. There was a ritual the Pharisees had developed of dipping their hands in water and wiping them off ceremonially to avoid ritual uncleanness. The Old Testament has plenty to say about uncleanness, but nothing about this ritual. But as far as the Pharisees were concerned, their traditions were as important as Scripture itself. To break the tradition was to sin – the Greek has the sense of transgression, that the disciples had offended God by not holding to the traditional handwashing.

Jesus never answers the Pharisees' question directly because He knows their whole tradition-based system is corrupt. Why bother arguing with just handwashing when the entire scheme of the Pharisees and their man-made rituals goes against the will of God? He gives a somewhat complex example. Here's how it worked: you could dedicate anything you owned to the temple as a gift to God known as "*corban*." Once you died, it belonged to the temple. But in the meantime, *you* could still use it. The Pharisees said it was very religious to do this.

The problem was, it was a loophole to get around the Old Testament law. What if Mom was a widow with no food? Sorry, Mom, I can't give you those chickens; they're *corban*. Sorry, Dad, I know I have lots of money, but I can't help you pay off your debts; it's *corban*. And the Pharisees were fine with it! In fact, many of them used it to get out of their obligations.

Jesus rakes them over the coals about it. He quotes Isaiah: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." He calls them hypocrites, wearing masks to disguise who they really are. He's angry that these men, the religious leaders of their day, led people away from God through their traditions. And they have the audacity to call foul on those who won't play their games!

That leads me to our first touchpoint for today, one will make us uncomfortable when we unpack it: *we must never substitute our traditions, personal viewpoints, and ideologies for the commands of God*. Very few things made Jesus as upset as this. We were made to follow God. We were made to be obedient to Him. But we have a bad habit of substituting rules we like for God's rules, then being prideful about keeping them while ignoring commands we don't like.

Every church has built up its own traditions. Tradition itself isn't evil. Tradition in Greek simply means "handing down." In the best sense, the Bible is tradition – the Word of God handed down from generation to generation. But tradition is a problem when it conflicts with the Word of God. The church has dealt with this for a very long time. The Reformation, from which all the varieties of Protestant churches sprung, happened because Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many others saw the intense corruption that occurred in the Catholic church when tradition took precedence over Scripture. And yet many of our churches have made their traditions into laws too; we have different traditions, but we're guilty of the same tendency.

I've been a part of godly Christian schools and organizations that had stringent rules against drinking, though Scripture states that Jesus and the disciples drank wine. Scripture warns against drunkenness, but it also says in the Psalms that wine "gladdens the heart" and "brings joy." My college had a strict rule against dancing. For decades, they refused to build a pool because of the potential issue of men and women using the pool at the same time – and donors who would quit giving if they built it.

These rules were meant to safeguard us against sin, but most of us who chose to be there still thought the rules broke the spirit of what Jesus said about tradition vs. the law. Some churches still ban playing cards, rock music, and movies. Do we feel good about ourselves if we keep these laws? Maybe. But what do they have to do with actual righteousness? Not much.

Bad traditions split churches and Christians. Does God say anything about our music except that it should reflect worship of Him in spirit and in truth? Very little. And yet churches split over modern songs and hymns – and what are they known as? "Traditional!" I've had church members upset at me when I told them that their loved ones wouldn't become angels – because it's not in Scripture. Yet that's a sentimental American tradition. Some churches won't accept a baptism if it happened when you were an infant. Other churches won't accept that you're a believer unless you have the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues.

Most of these happen outside our particular church. Yet we have to look at ourselves to see what traditions and sacred cows we still hold onto. What social issues could we address? The welfare system? The national anthem? Class warfare and poverty? Immigration? The war on drugs? In this election, many are staking claims to candidates and positions. But very seldom are those positions thoroughly backed up by Scripture, and people of good faith could come to different biblical conclusions. Sometimes, we become pragmatic rather than godly; we trust what we believe works instead of what is holy and righteous. That's why we must be so careful.

The reason we must be careful to distinguish between man-made traditions and godliness is because godliness is always pleasing to the Lord, but traditions can make us hard-hearted towards God. Outward appearances can deceive us. The Pharisees faithfully attended far more synagogue meetings and temple services than we will ever attend church. They were "good people." But that didn't make them holy. They had God on their lips, but not on their hearts.

That's why we have to examine our own sacred cows. Does our viewpoint on welfare or class or immigration, no matter what it is, conflict with the biblical mandate to personally care for the poor, the widow, and the stranger to our culture? Does our viewpoint on crime and punishment line up with what God says about judgment and grace? Do our personal preferences about how church sounds and looks honor God, or do they chase people away? These are the kinds of questions we are called to ask ourselves by Jesus' answer to the Pharisees.

Jesus moves on, saying to the crowd, "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him unclean." This surprised even the disciples who had to go back and check if they understood Him. Did this go against God's law? Leviticus lists a variety of animals the Israelites couldn't eat – not just pigs but also camels, rabbits, sea creatures without fins and scales like shrimp, and a variety of others.

But here's the deal: in the law, each animal is called "unclean for you." That means "unclean for the people of the earthly nation of Israel." There was nothing morally objectionable about the animals; God did not create an eternal law for all people that no one anywhere could eat shrimp and still be His follower. Through the ritual laws, God established how Israel would be uniquely different – they would stand out among other nations as *His* people. God wasn't saying, "Don't eat pork because it's morally evil to eat pork." God was saying, "Don't eat pork because I asked you not to. Don't eat it because you love me enough not to."

Jesus says that the things you physically eat don't in and of themselves make you righteous or unrighteous before God – it's your obedience towards God that matters. He's paving the way for the Gentiles, who had no food restrictions, to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus isn't getting rid of the dietary laws of the Old Testament yet, but He does say that eating without washing your hands according to some tradition doesn't make you unclean before God.

Jesus is really upset because the Pharisees have gotten everything so mixed around. They were sticklers on the dietary laws, but they found all sorts of ways to become rich on the backs of the poor! They prided themselves on their holiness, yet they taught you could divorce your wife for doing almost anything – even burning your breakfast! They taught ways you could go back on an oath! They fasted and prayed and then condemned the poor as being cursed by God.

That leads to our second thought for the day: *character matters*. Character influences the whole of who we are and what we do. Character involves every part of us – our heart, our mind, our actions. The Pharisees wanted to be known as religious people. They followed their rules so other people would look up to them, give them the best seats in the synagogue, and praise them on how pious they were. But they weren't men of character. It was an act that covered up the evil that they did, that they explained away through their rules and regulations.

If we were to boil this whole passage down to one concept, it's tradition vs. character. Sometimes rules try to safeguard our virtue, like the ones at some Christian colleges I mentioned before. But those rules can't create character. You don't have to be a Christian, or even religious, to follow rules. Christian character goes far deeper than that.

Christian character develops as we follow Jesus through our lives. It comes from a desire to please God and to have the heart of God. Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, the character traits of a Jesus-follower: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the things we are trying to cultivate with God's help in our hearts.

You can have these traits no matter what you eat or how you wash yourself before you eat it. Doesn't matter if you're skinny or large, introverted or extroverted, young or old, rich or poor. You can have these if you break the sacred cows. If you go to church on Sundays at 8:00am or 2:00pm or Saturdays at 5:00pm, if you sing contemporary or traditional music, if you make a moral choice to vote for Trump or Clinton or Johnson or Stein, if you love the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Jr. Day or if you treat them as just another day, if you smoke or drink alcohol on occasion, none of those things makes you spiritually unclean. Being clean is living in obedience to Jesus and growing in His character. Being unclean is living however you want without regard for what God thinks, no matter what "nice" masks you wear.

Are we people of character? Do we spend our money on ourselves or on others? Do we give thought to using what we have to further God's Kingdom, to minister to the broken and hurting? Do we come down harshly on others who make mistakes, or do we love others who are hard to love because we know we need God's grace too? None of us is perfect at this; we fail often. We need to turn back to Jesus over and over to continue our growth in His grace and character. But as often as we ask, He will restore us and build that character in us.

Now we're going to go back to the center section of the passage. What it has for us is short but important. It's this final point: *expect to offend (and be offended) when traditions and sacred cows are torn down*. I might have already offended some of you here today suggesting that some position you hold isn't the only "right" one, or that some tradition you hold dear might be holding you or someone you love back from the Kingdom of God. As a pastor, I try to balance grace and truth, but in a culture such as ours, people will be offended when you tear down sacred cows and speak biblically.

Our culture and our peers don't want to hear what Scripture has to say about sexuality and abortion and greed and charity. Yet sometimes, we have to speak up for the truth and be counted among God's people. Sometimes standing for that truth will offend. What happens when you offend others? Should you soften your stance to win their favor?

With the Pharisees, Jesus wasn't concerned about offending them at all. Why? Their being offended only illustrated they were blind – they couldn't see God's truth. Jesus said, "Leave them." Harsh? Maybe. But when we are offended, we can't see past whatever's offended us. Jesus hints that they are already in a pit too deep to see the truth. They have been handed down traditions that don't save – they've been led by blind guides, and now they do the same. There is no use arguing with them. If God doesn't reveal it to them, arguing about it won't help. It's true with our friends and family too. Tell them the truth, show them love and grace, but if they're offended, don't be offended back. Don't fight back or get angry. Hand the matter over to God.

The thing is, it's hard for us to give up our sacred cows. Sometimes, we ourselves are offended by what we have to give up. We love our traditions. They give us comfort and provide meaning. And not all traditions are bad, not at all. But it's hard when we realize that something we've clung to for years and years isn't really true and isn't really helping us. It's painful. We hate it. Yet with the help of Jesus and His Holy Spirit, we can let go of any tradition that is a hindrance and not a help to our relationship with God.

Not every tradition is meant to be thrown away, but we need to regularly examine our beliefs, ideals, and positions to make sure they fall in line with God's holy Word to us. He has begun the cleanup work on every believer, on our character so that we can follow His truth. Stick by Him closely, obey Him quickly, and let Him show you the difference between true righteousness and sacred cows.