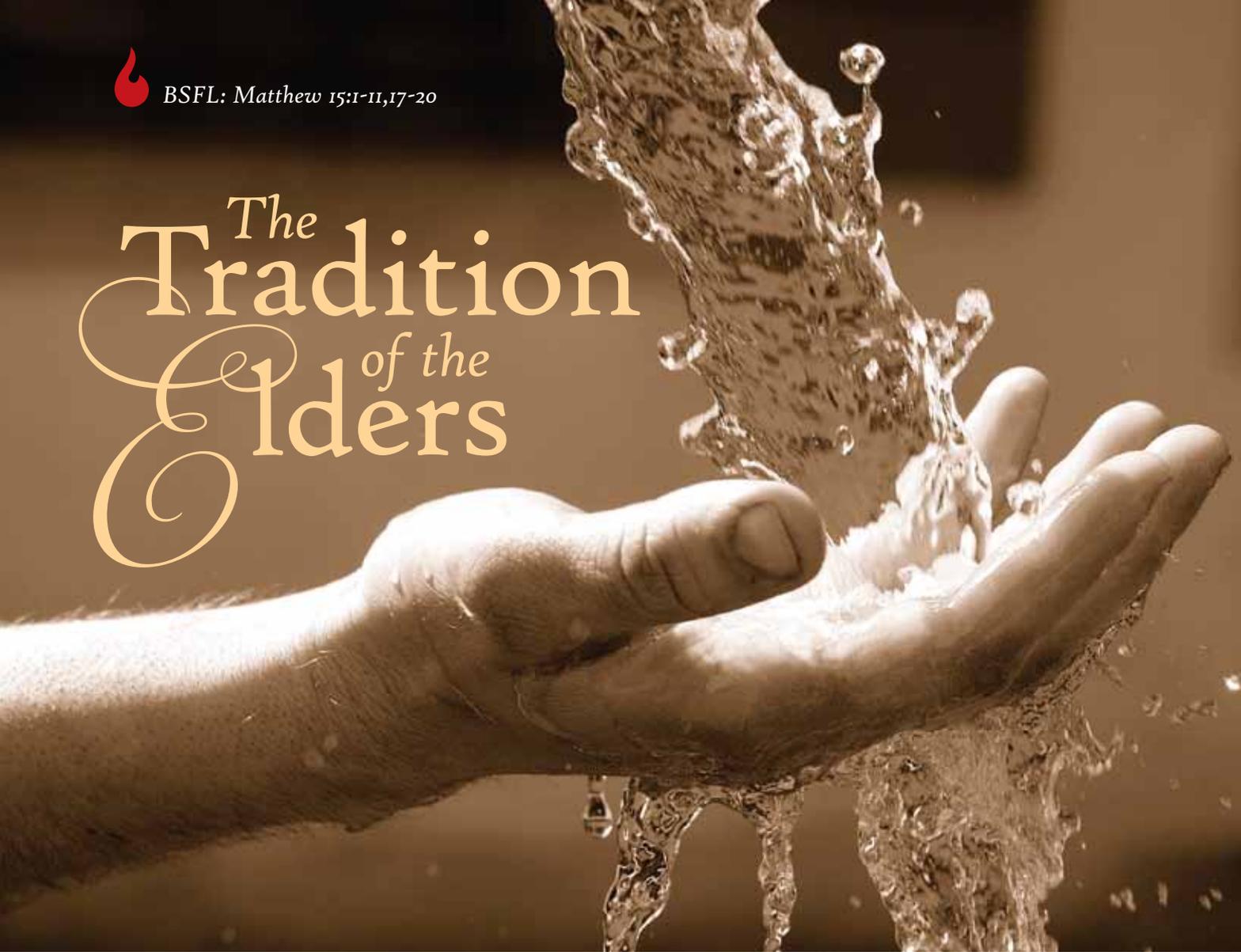




The Tradition of the Elders



ISTOCK PHOTO

By R. Kelvin Moore

“HYPOCRITES!” THE HEBREW word referred to the profane, irreligious, and godless.¹ In Jesus’ day the Greek word described a play actor or pretender.² In Matthew 15:7, Jesus used this forceful word to describe the Pharisees and the scribes. The Pharisees devoted themselves to the meticulous practice of the law while the scribes taught these laws professionally. Jesus must have stunned the members of these two ultra-religious groups when He referred to them as profane and pretenders. What prompted Jesus’ harsh rebuke?

Matthew 14 records Jesus’ ministry at Gennesaret (14:34; also called the Sea of Galilee). In Matthew 15, a group of Pharisees and scribes came from Jerusalem, no doubt in order to confront Jesus. What appears to have been an impassioned discussion between the Pharisees, scribes, and Jesus began when the Pharisees and scribes accused Jesus’ disciples of not washing their hands before they ate (15:2). The parallel episode

in the Gospel of Mark informs readers that “They [the Pharisees and the scribes] observed that some of His disciples were eating their bread with unclean—that is, unwashed—hands” (7:2, HCSB). At this point, let me encourage you to pause, locate a Bible concordance, and find the Old Testament passage that records this specific law. Allow me to save you some time. You will not find this prohibition in the Old Testament.³ Instead, the Pharisees and scribes pointed out that Jesus’ disciples had broken the “tradition of the elders” (Matt. 15:2). To what did the Pharisees and scribes refer as the “tradition of the elders”? What influenced the development of this tradition? What authority did the “tradition of the elders” have in Jesus’ day? What did Jesus think of this tradition?

The Babylonians destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah and its beloved capital, Jerusalem, in 586 B.C. The Babylonians took many of the Hebrews to Babylon as prisoners of war. World power shifted when the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. The Persian king (Cyrus the Great) allowed the



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS (4/7/14)

Left: Ruins atop Lachish, overlooking the valley below. One of the last cities to fall to the Babylonians was Lachish.

Center: Marble statuette from the 2nd cent. A.D. of a comic actor.

The Pharisees and scribes used the tradition of the elders to criticize Jesus' disciples.

Hebrews to return to Jerusalem.⁴ The returning Hebrews realized that God had punished them (in 586 B.C.) because of their failure to obey His Law (that is, the *written* Law the Lord gave Moses on Mount Sinai). Arriving back in Jerusalem in 538 B.C. and later, religious leaders found themselves in a conundrum. How were they to keep the Law when the Law itself, at times, did not provide specific instructions (on the washing of hands for instance)? For example, the Law directed the Hebrews to “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8, HCSB). But beyond the instructions to not work on the Sabbath, the Law failed to provide application for every situation that might arise related to Sabbath activities. Logic dictated that if the Hebrews hoped to avoid future punishment, they had to obey the Law. But, exactly what did the Mosaic Law teach? From this background the religious leaders (especially the Pharisees) expanded the Mosaic Law with their own interpretations and applications. This expansion became known as the “oral” tradition or the “tradition of the elders.”

According to some, God gave Moses the oral law at the same time He gave him the written Law. This meant that the oral law, which had to be committed to memory rather than read, would be passed from generation to generation and thus could never be taken from God's people. While this tradition has no biblical foundation, it does indicate



that the Pharisees and scribes believed the Lord gave Moses both the written *and* the oral Law. At some point between 538 B.C. and the time of Jesus, some accepted the “tradition of the elders” (the oral law) with the same authority as the original Law God gave Moses.

The Pharisees and scribes used the tradition of the elders to criticize Jesus' disciples, in this instance, for not washing their hands before they ate. Jesus, forever the master Teacher, used this same tradition of the elders to point out the hypocrisy of His accusers. Jesus chose one (actually, He used two illustrations) of the most significant Old Testament laws as a case study: the Commandment to “Honor your father and your mother.” To honor them “meant not just to hold one's parents in high esteem but to care for them financially and in every way.”⁵

By Jesus' day, however, the tradition of the elders allowed a person to dedicate food, money, and property to the Lord for use in the temple. Although details about how this worked are not clear, this dedication allowed the owner to continue to use this money and property during his lifetime. Thus, one who had made such a commitment could, according to the tradition of the elders, neglect parents, declaring that “Whatever benefit you might have received from me is a gift committed to the temple” (Matt. 15:5, HCSB). One can hear the Hebrew say, “I *would* care

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (10/6/4)



Right: Seating 5,000 spectators, the theater at Sepphoris, a town

located about four miles from Nazareth. In Jesus' day, Sepphoris was

the Roman capital of the region and a center for commerce and culture.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JAMES MALEMORE/ ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (10/26/11)



Left: Plain of Gennesaret overlooking the north-west corner of the Sea of Galilee. Measuring 13 miles long by 8 miles wide, this is the only fresh-water lake in the region. Small fishing villages dotted the perimeter of the lake in the first century, thus providing a major source of income. While Jesus was ministering in this region, the scribes and Pharisees came from Jerusalem to challenge Him and His disciples.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ MIKE RUTHERFORD (59/2055)

A NEW TRADITION



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (9/11/9)

The Babylonians destroyed the Jerusalem temple in 586 B.C. and took many Hebrews captive. No longer being able to worship in the temple, the Jews came to value two important Hebrew traditions, circumcision and honoring the Sabbath—two traditions they could continue even while away from their homeland. Many scholars believe that

synagogical worship also developed during this time, a tradition that the Jews brought back with them after being released from captivity. Local synagogues made local worship possible.

Giving evidence of the continued importance of this tradition is this synagogue that the Jewish Zealots used while holed up in Herod's Masada complex in the first century A.D. **B**

for my parents, but I have committed my money and property to the Lord and to the temple and now I do not have the financial means to help my parents.” This now-adult child, supported by the tradition of the elders, had a religious foundation upon which to base the neglect of his parents!

What did Jesus think of the tradition of the elders? He pointed out that the one who made such a commitment (a commitment that often led to the neglect of parents) did not honor his parents at all. Jesus concluded, explaining that the Pharisees and the scribes, by using the tradition of the elders in such a way, “revoked God’s word” (v. 6, HCSB). Jesus concluded that this use of the tradition of the elders clearly broke the Law God had given to Moses.

Traditions can be good. But the Pharisees and scribes failed to recognize the difference between the absolute truth of the Mosaic (written) Law and the opinions of their “tradition of the elders” (the oral law). **B**

1. "חֲנֻפִּי" (*chaneph*; profane, irreligious) in Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1981), 338. Check Job 8:13, which translates the Hebrew word as “godless.”

2. Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, vol. 1 in *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 149.

3. The Old Testament does have laws for washing of hands in certain religious situations (see Ex. 30:18-21 and Deut. 21:6). The concept of washing the hands before eating probably emerged “shortly before the time of Jesus.” Richard France, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 242.

4. Cyrus also encouraged the Hebrews to rebuild their temple. See Ezra 1:1-5.

5. Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. 1 in *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 586.

R. Kelvin Moore is professor of Christian studies at Union University, Jackson, Tennessee, and pastor of Idlewild Baptist Church, Idlewild, Tennessee.