

# The Christian's Attitude Toward Tradition



Discovering God's Word  
Bible Study Series

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Written by Eric Krieg

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# The Christian's Attitude Toward Tradition

## Introduction

A. What is your attitude toward tradition? That is, what is your mindset toward those established ways and beliefs that have been passed down to you? Do you treat all tradition alike? Or, do you recognize there is something significantly different between the two kinds of tradition that can be passed down to you?

B. To observe this key distinction, consider the exchange in Matthew 21:23-27 between some Jews and Jesus. Jesus shows there are ultimately only two sources of authority – either from God or from people. And, the two are not equal.

C. This is the case with tradition. Many believe certain things to be right because they have always been taught to believe and do those things. Yet, they do not consider the differences between traditions from God and from people.

D. We all have certain traditionally held beliefs and practices. Certain things have been woven into the fabric of what you do and believe. So, you must work diligently to develop the right attitudes toward those traditions and honestly evaluate their source!

E. Purpose: To learn to consider the source of traditions and how you should handle each one.

## 1. God's Traditions

A. God has communicated some traditions

1. 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15. The things they were taught by the gospel of Jesus Christ were called "traditions." So, there is a pattern of belief and behavior God wants to be woven throughout the fabric of your life revealed in the Bible. Paul (an apostle inspired by the Holy Spirit) said the Thessalonians were to hold to the traditions they were taught in the gospel they heard from those who were inspired, whether by word or letter.

2. 2 Thessalonians 3:6. The apostle Paul made it clear that there were authoritative traditions they received through the preaching of the gospel. And, he showed there are consequences for failing to keep them.

3. 2 Timothy 1:13. Think about the concept of a pattern. Patterns are established ways to do a certain thing (i.e. for cooking, sewing, crafting, building, etc.). In this text, though, Paul was addressing an even more important pattern – a pattern of sound teaching (words). These words contain no element of error (are perfectly healthy for the soul).

- All the words of God in the Bible form a pattern, blueprint, and tradition for how God wants people to believe and conduct their lives. Therefore, these words must be held on to and never let go – because they have originated with God!

#### B. God's traditions are not optional

1. God's traditions are not like other traditions that exist in this world. For, God's traditions are authoritative (Matthew 28:18). Therefore, they are not optional if you want to please God and have eternal life in Heaven (unless God says they are, i.e. whether to marry).

2. You must not stray from these traditions (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 2 Timothy 1:13). You must learn them and let them become so deeply engrained in you that you will obey them.

3. To violate these traditions is to sin against God and results in consequences. 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15, for example, teaches Christians who do keep the traditions they received to withdraw from those erring Christians who do not.

4. There are also eternal consequences for those who fail to keep God's traditions (John 12:48; Revelation 20:12).

- God's traditions must not be considered as equal to man-made traditions that could be adopted in your life. Instead, God's traditions are fully authoritative and will judge whether you have lived to serve and obey God or not. If you do not live by them, you will experience eternal separation from God in Hell (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9)!

#### C. God's traditions must not be changed

1. The traditions given by God are not subject to change or improvement. For, God's word does not change and never becomes irrelevant or needs revision (1 Peter 1:25).

2. God's word should be viewed like an ancient land marker and an ancient path.

- Proverbs 22:28. In ancient days, removing a landmark (boundary marker) would have caused major trouble in knowing property boundaries. In the same way, people must not change the traditions God has given to us – even though they have been around for many centuries!
- Jeremiah 18:15. The result of leaving the ancient paths/roads that had been established by God would be destruction for these people. In the same way, people must not look for new paths/roads today and ignore the traditions God established for people to walk in centuries ago!

3. Revelation 22:18-19 makes it clear exactly how much of God's traditions can be changed without consequence. Both adding to them and taking from them results in consequences. Therefore, the only thing you must do is believe and obey them!

#### D. Some examples

1. The traditions God has established are wide-reaching. They encompass areas of personal purity, personal service to God, the home, the church, etc. Consider just a few of the many traditions God has given in the New Testament.

2. Consider worshiping God through song (Colossians 3:16). Every time God addresses how He wants people to use music in worshiping Him today, He specifies the action of singing. People should hold to this tradition because it has been given by God.

3. Consider partaking of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). This is the only passage in the New Testament that shows when Christians are to take the Lord's Supper – and it shows Christians doing so on the first day of the week. People should hold to this tradition because it has been given by God.

4. Consider baptism by immersion in water (Romans 6:3-4). Not only does the Greek word for "baptism" mean immersion, but God also shows this as the only action He approves. People should hold to this tradition because it has been given by God.

5. Consider marriage between one man and one woman (Matthew 19:4-5). God's design for marriage was for every marriage to involve one man and one woman. People should hold to this tradition because it has been given by God.

## 2. Human Traditions

### A. People have many traditions

1. Nobody is exempt from having human traditions make up part of how they think and the actions they take. But, we need to learn to distinguish between these and God's traditions – and not hold to them in the same way!

- There are human traditions woven many things you do in life – national traditions, local traditions, family traditions, religious traditions, etc. Think about traditions you have accepted and follow in your life.

2. Paul recognized he had held to some traditions that originated with his ancestors regarding Judaism (Galatians 1:13-14). Fortunately, he was able to properly distinguish between traditions that originated with God and people.

3. Many people never evaluate or challenge what they are taught to believe and do. They just follow along with those things blindly. And, this is where human tradition becomes extremely dangerous.

- I have heard the story told about a woman who would cut off the ends of her ham before she would bake it. Apparently, she never really thought about why she did this. She just always did it. Whenever her daughter asked her why she did that, she replied that it was because it's what her mother had taught her to do. So, they went to the woman's mother and asked why. Again, she did not know and said she did it because that's how her mother taught her. Finally, when that woman's mother was asked, she replied that she did it so that her ham would fit into her pan!

4. It is easy for things to be woven into the fabric of what we believe and do by tradition – without ever testing and questioning why we believe or do them. So, we must put everything we believe and do to the test to know whether they please God (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22). For, God expects us to do everything in the name (by the authority) of Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:17). So, a tradition cannot be good if it does not have Bible authority behind it.

### B. Some human traditions violate Scripture

1. There are human traditions that are not authorized and that even violate the teachings of Scripture (Matthew 15:1-9). Jesus said these

Jewish people violated the commandment of God because of their own human traditions.

- By holding to their human traditions above God's word, they looked like they were serving God, but were actually worshipping God in vain. Later, Jesus said that every plant His Father has not planted will be uprooted and said those who would blindly follow such people would fall into a ditch (Matthew 15:13-14)!

2. There are clearly traditions that are not authorized by God and that are contrary to what He has authorized (Colossians 2:8; 1 Peter 1:18).

- Some people consume alcohol, smoke, and do drugs because of the traditions passed down from their parents or culture. Some mishandle the money God has blessed them with because of how they have been trained to handle money. Some try to worship God with mechanical instruments because it is a commonly accepted way of worshipping. Some live together outside of marriage because it is widely accepted. Some have their babies sprinkled with water because that is what they have been taught should be done.

3. An action is not acceptable to God just because there is a human tradition that accepts it. Instead, those who hold to beliefs and practices that have either added to or subtracted from the traditions God has given will be punished (Revelation 22:18-19).

- It is essential for you to carefully evaluate whether the human tradition you have accepted has Bible authority or not. If it does not, you must quickly change your beliefs and practices so you can please God!

### C. Some human traditions harmonize with Scripture

1. As you put all your human traditions to the test, comparing them to the word of God, some may harmonize with the authority God has given. In the realm of general authority (where God has authorized something but given options as to how to accomplish it), it may be that a human tradition is perfectly acceptable to God and helps you please Him.

2. Consider that many local churches purchase property and build meeting places. This is authorized by the Scriptures through the generic authority for churches to assemble. So, this human tradition is acceptable to God and helps many churches worship.

3. Consider that many local churches install a baptistry in their meeting places. This is authorized by the Scriptures through the generic

authority God has given to baptize. So, the indoor baptistry helps many local churches carry out God's command to baptize.

4. Consider that many local churches follow human traditions concerning their meeting times. Although local churches must assemble on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2), God has given general authority for the church to assemble as often as it needs to do so (Acts 2:46). Many churches have found it helpful to assemble at various times.

5. Consider that the order of the worship services for a church have often become a matter of human tradition. Although God specifies what activities of worship are authorized, He has left it up to each congregation to choose the length of time to spend on each activity and the order in which to do them.

D. Human traditions must not be bound

1. Regarding human traditions that harmonize with God's authority, God never permits them to be bound and made to be a test of fellowship! Unfortunately, many Christians have either confused their traditions and God's traditions, never evaluated which is which, or have tried to bully others into accepting their traditions. Yet, God does not approve of such!

2. This is what the Jewish leaders were often guilty of doing. For, Jesus never rebuked them for keeping God's laws. Instead, Jesus often rebuked them for either their hypocrisy or for binding their human traditions as if they were equal to God's laws (Matthew 15:1-9).

3. Today, some Christians are like Diotrephes in wanting others to follow their traditions (3 John 1:9-11). So, they force other people to do what they want – sometimes threatening to throw the other person out of the church or threatening to leave themselves.

4. Human traditions that are authorized by Scripture would fall into the same category as the issues addressed in Romans 14 and 15.

- The issue of individual liberty is addressed in these chapters. These are things God had authorized but never commanded, leaving it up to the individual to decide (i.e. whether to eat meat). Christians must not divide and cut off fellowship from one another just because they do not agree about such things. Instead, they must work them out in a unified way so that everyone is built up in the faith.



5. Whenever a human tradition is authorized by God, it can be used as part of your acceptable service to God. However, if somebody decides not to follow that human tradition and opts for another one that is also approved by God, that is also okay! You must work to live at peace with one another and build each other up in the faith, regardless of these traditions.

#### E. Changing human traditions

1. While God's traditions must never be changed, human traditions can and sometimes should be changed.

2. Whenever a human tradition is not authorized by God or directly violates Scripture, you *must* change that tradition (no matter who taught it to you or how long you have practiced it)!

3. There may also be times when human traditions that harmonize with God's words should be changed. Consider a couple examples.

- You may need to change a human tradition to help others follow Christ. Paul was willing to lay aside his own traditions to help other people go to Heaven (1 Corinthians 9:22). Certainly, you must not allow your human traditions to hinder anyone from accepting and obeying the gospel of Christ!
- You may need to change a human tradition to be more effective in your service. While Christians and churches must always follow God's pattern, we must never become slaves to our own traditions so as to hinder our effectiveness for the Lord! So, if there is a more effective way that is authorized to accomplish God's work, we should be willing to change!

#### Conclusion

A. Has this lesson described your attitude toward tradition? Are you willing to evaluate everything you do and believe so as to know whether it is a tradition from God or people?

B. You must never compromise concerning the traditions that come from God. Rather, you must hold on to the pattern God has revealed in the Scriptures.

C. Then, you must get away from every human tradition that is contrary to the will of God and learn to handle all other human traditions according to the way that pleases God.

## Study Questions

What are traditions? What are the two sources of tradition?

### 1. God's Traditions

Has God communicated traditions? If so, how has He done so?

Are God's traditions optional? Why or why not?

Can God's traditions be changed without consequence?

Give some examples of traditions given by God.

## **2. Human Traditions**

Do people have traditions? Where do these traditions come from? How do they present a challenge?

Do some human traditions violate Scripture? Give some examples.

Do some human traditions harmonize with Scripture? Give some examples.

Should human traditions be bound as tests of fellowship? Why or why not?

When should human traditions be changed?

