

# Life: Tradition or God's Word?

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- *This LifeWay Bible Study for Life lesson for March 3 focuses on Matthew 15.*

When I hear the word, “tradition,” I immediately think of the story, “The Fiddler on the Roof.” Tevya, the father, tries desperately to hold on to his Jewish tradition in the midst of an ever-changing world and his five, ever-changing daughters. His oldest daughters defy tradition in their choices for marriage and send Tevya’s world into a spin. The musical title is a metaphor: Tevya, and others in the village, compare themselves to fiddlers on a roof because of the struggle to keep balance in life.

According to Tevya, traditions are the way they keep balance: “A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But here, in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn’t easy. You may ask, ‘Why do we stay up here if it’s so dangerous? Well, we stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: tradition!”

## The Pharisees

In Matthew 15, the Pharisees had a similar understanding of balancing life in the spiritual realm. Their life’s work was spent keeping and establishing tradition with the intention of maintaining right standing with God. As fiddlers on the roof, these religious leaders kept balance and righteousness by washing their hands, purifying their bodies and making sure everyone else followed the rules.

Jesus disturbs their balancing act when he asks in verse 3, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” He caught them

in their vicious cycle of a charade. Their quest for tradition began well, with good intent. They wanted right standing and right relationship with God, so they made up rules and rules to keep the rules. They made sure their eyes, ears, hands, feet and mouths were doing all the right things, so their hearts would be protected.

However, in their quest to protect their hearts, they created the perfect climate for their hearts to be hardened and over time, they became insensitive to the Holy Spirit and leading of God. Their balancing act had crippled and damaged their relationship with the Father and led to lives of sin. Traditional religious activity done for the sake of tradition certainly distracts from the reality of the heart and ultimately leads to lack of faith and trust. This balancing act is a tiresome one.

### **God's word trumps tradition**

The word of God trumps tradition in every way. Tradition is not all bad, but where it contradicts the truth of the Bible, it is wrong. Jesus calls his followers into a constant dialogue and evaluation process. Even traditions formed with good intentions can sour over time, so we must constantly read and prayerfully consider God's Word as it directs and convicts our hearts. When we constantly are in the process of asking God to show us errors in our tradition and way of life, our hearts are kept soft. As he keeps our hearts soft and our mind open to his direction and desire for us, he is able to transform us from the inside out.

Jesus said, "But the things come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them" (v. 18). The heart is the ultimate driver of our actions, motives and capacity for relationship with Jesus. And it is the heart that matters most to God.

The deceiver wants you and me to focus on tradition and our outward religious actions so our hearts will harden. Eventually, we will be deceived

into thinking we are in right standing with God and only will have eyes to evaluate everyone else's actions as they pale in comparison to our own zeal. We will be unable to hear the voice of God and respond to his direction, but we will not be aware.

## **Purified hearts**

However, Jesus is calling us to have purified hearts. Purification happens when we remain open to his truth even when it bucks our traditional actions and comfort. Soft hearts remain moldable, and thus, able to be made righteous by Christ himself.

Jesus never was concerned with comfort or balance in religion or relationship with him. He never was a proponent of ritual activity to mask the real issues of the heart. Jesus desires a dynamic relationship with you and me—one of change and excitement.

There is no list of actions or traditions to take the place of a growing relationship with him. A relationship with the King of Kings demands conversations, prayer, Bible study, inward evaluations and seeking. Jesus demanded the Pharisees, and you and me, to get off the roof and stop the balancing act. He is leading us on an adventure where he guides, directs and keeps the balance. He wants you and me to step out of our comfortable realm of tradition and see what it is he has for us. We must abandon the task of scratching out a pleasant, simple tune on the rooftop, and play a new song. The song played when our balancing act ceases is one of remarkable beauty. And it should be played loud, with confidence, so others may join in the song.