

Inspiration of God's Word Versus Tradition'

by A.W. Tozer

The sermon emphasizes the importance of following the inspired Word of God rather than tradition, and teaches that righteousness comes from faith and love, not from formal law-keeping or tradition.

Scripture: Titus 1:13

Topics: "Inspiration of Scripture", "Freedom from Tradition"

Description

A.W. Tozer emphasizes the conflict between the inspiration of God's Word and human traditions, particularly in the context of early Christianity where Jewish traditions threatened to overshadow the gospel. He explains how the early church faced challenges from Jewish Christians who insisted on adhering to the oral laws and traditions, which often contradicted the teachings of Christ. Tozer argues that true righteousness comes from faith and the heart, rather than mere adherence to ceremonial laws. He warns against allowing traditions to dictate one's relationship with God, stressing that the motive behind actions is what truly matters. Ultimately, Tozer calls for a return to the purity of the gospel, free from the burdens of human traditions.

Transcript

Inspiration of God's Word Versus Tradition

Pastor and author A.W. Tozer

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Now, I want to read the rest of chapter one of Titus beginning with verse 14. Well, I better read 13 too because I don't want to break into a semicolon. Paul says, this witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply. that they may be sound in the faith not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men that turned from the truth. Because unto the pure, all things are pure. But unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure: but even their mind and conscience is defiled. They profess that they know God, but in works, they deny him, being abominable and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.

Now, I am sorry that this isn't going to be what they call an inspirational sermon. In preaching the Bible, if you stay close to the Bible, it's like staying close to the score of a musical composition. You can't take too many liberties or else you're not playing Bach, you're playing somebody else. And if I'm giving expository

sermons on Paul and I take too many liberties with Paul, then I'm preaching Tozer and not Paul, which isn't a good thing. So, I have to stay by Paul. I don't apologize for Paul, he doesn't need my defense. But it so happens that this Crete crowd was a bit rambunctious and they needed some pretty severe apostolic correction, and they got it. But this is instructive if it's not inspiring, and you will find after all, that inspiration comes out of information.

Now, he says in verse ten above he said, there were vain talkers and deceivers, and I talked about those last week. And then he added this melancholy little phrase, especially they of the circumcision-poor Jews. I am not antisemitic. I love the Jews. I love them for Christ's sake. The blood that flowed on Calvary, from its human side and standpoint, was a Jewish blood. Jesus our Lord, was the son of a Jewish maiden, as well as of God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And my love for the Jews cannot be challenged. But the poor sons of Sarah and Abraham, never seem to keep out of trouble, especially they of the circumcision, said Paul-too bad.

This island of Crete had a very large Jewish population as I've explained, and of course, they travel a lot. Jews get around a lot. And some of them got converted to Christ, while they were elsewhere on around over the country, or around over the world. And some of them were converted there in Crete no doubt. And they had become Christians, at least by profession. But they had made the mistake of bringing their Judaism over into the church with them. And they were still strongly influenced by Judaism. That was so strong in Palestine, of course, it would be strong there, that they had to have a conference, a council, we call them now, and decide on whether they did or did not have to go through the Jewish ritual before they could be a Christian. And they decided they did not. The fathers had met, James Peter, and the rest of them, and they decided that for the sake of not offending the Jews, they were to do four things. For God's sake and Christ's sake, they were not to commit fornication, but also, they weren't to eat things offered to idols. That was a concession to the standards of the Jewish people, so they would not offend them. But they said, you do not have to keep the Law of Moses. By faith, our hearts are purified even as the rest. But these Jews, the circumcision, they followed the church around, everywhere, causing trouble. And Paul said, they were vain teachers. And they were teachers, these are Jewish Christians.

Now, I'll have to explain how this was and then we'll be informed and we hope that we'll get some inspiration out of information. These Jewish Christians taught this. They said there was a written law. And that law consisted of two things. It consisted of the ten words written on stone by the finger of God. And it consisted then of the additional which was inspired by God through Moses. It was the Pentateuch, the five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy we say now. But they said also that there was another law called the law of the lip. And that was an oral law. And they believed in that oral law just as certainly as they believed in the Ten Commandments. I don't know if they had been put up to take their choice which they would have chosen. But at any rate, they taught the oral law, the traditions, just as vigorously as they taught the law of Moses. But they said this oral law of the lip was passed on by memory, and it was passed on by memory. We know that it was tradition. That's the difference between tradition and written Scripture, or written beliefs, if they pass it on by tradition.

In some countries I'm told, in certain Arabic countries and Oriental countries, a great deal of their literature is passed down by memory. Education consists of memorizing the great classics in China, at least for many years until the modernization of China. And if they destroyed all their books overnight, all the books in China had been destroyed at certain times, they could have all been reproduced out of the memory of the scholars. And they say the same is true in Arabia, that the book of the Mohamadan Qur'an could have been reproduced out of the memories of the people. And so, they had here these Jews, an oral law many,

many times larger than the Old Testament itself. And it was passed on by memory by tradition, and each family gave it to their children, they grew up and gave it to their children, along with the written law, which we believe to be the inspired Word of God.

Now this grew in volume through the years. The great rabbis added to it. And it became part of the canonical law. And it regulated every act and every day and every relation, almost every thought, where God had left men free to do as they pleased within the framework of righteousness and truth. They insisted on following that man and putting yoke on every minute of his time. And these regulations took the character of the law, and they even superseded the law of God in some people's minds.

Now, those were the vain talkers of which Paul writes. The Jewish fables and commandments of men that turned from the truth. And this later on was reduced to writing, this oral law was reduced to writing about the time of Christ or a little bit later. And it's known now as the Talmud. Oh, for thirty years I've been a little bit acquainted. I've had nodding acquaintance with the Jewish Talmud. I bought their books and read them, and I know what they have. They're special, there's much good in it incidentally. There's much good in the Jewish Talmud, much good. But they have a strange way of interpreting Scripture. They make jots and tittles mean things. They take a certain sentence, which is obviously means just what it means, and they add a certain, strange interpretation to that that makes it mean something else. And then that became part of the tradition and part of the Law. And these brethren were coming to the Christians and saying to them, now, it's nice, I'm a Christian too, of a Jewish extraction. But you must understand that you can't just come roaring in out of paganism and become a Christian, believe in Jesus Christ and be saved just like that. You have to come by way of the law of the lip, the Jewish tradition, because salvation is of the Jews. Jesus himself said it was, and you've got to listen to us.

So, they began to lay these Talmudic, rabbinical laws upon the Jews. About the sixth century, it was collected and written down, so we now have it as the Talmud. And one man said about it, it consists of countless ceremonies and the practice of elaborate ritual which never was written in the book of the Bible at all. And to these Talmudists, righteousness, or a holy life, lay in living according to these rabbinical laws or rules. And when our Lord Jesus Christ came to Jewry, He found that the Law of Moses, the Old Testament Law, which was inspired of God, had been pushed into the background, and that this, this oral law or tradition had taken over and the Jews were under what Peter called yoke of bondage which neither we nor our fathers could bear.

Now, let me give you an example of it from the 15th chapter of the book of Matthew. Here's a perfect example of how Christ met this head-on. He didn't fool with it. He didn't try to find the common ground and do all that they tell us now we should do. He simply butted into it head-on.

Then came to Jesus, Scribes and Pharisees. And they of course were the rabinists, the Talmudists, those who were traditionalists. Then came to Jesus, Scribes and Pharisees which are of Jerusalem saying, why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? There it is, the tradition of the elders, the law of the lip, the Talmud? Why do they transgress the tradition of the elders, for they wash not their hands, when they eat bread?

And He answered them by asking them a question. Why do ye transgress the commandments of God by your traditions? They said, why do you transgress the tradition? And He said, why do you transgress the law of God by your tradition? There we have it. So long as there are human beings alive in the world, we'll be, at least, under the shadow of traditions. There's great deal of tradition in this church, a great deal of

tradition. We do things because our fathers did, and we're too lazy to change it. And after a while, it begins to take on a certain form. Because we do it a certain way, there are churches, where if you didn't have an altar call with people kneeling at the front of the church, they think you'd backslidden. And yet, you go back as far as the Wesleys, and you will find no altars, no place for people to kneel. Finney, when he came along, had to argue and fight to have an anxious seat. That was the front row for people to come and sit if they wanted to be saved. That's how tradition takes over. Now, there are people that come to this church and because I don't give an altar call every Sunday night, and say now, come down here and kneel, walk out and say they're backslidden there. You don't baptize nine, three or four weeks ago, and eight or nine tonight, and not have God doing something in people's lives. And yet, because we don't follow the tradition, they don't like it.

Well, they said, why do you transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? Then He said in verse nine, in vain they do worship me teaching for doctrines, the commandments of men. Now, they carried that same tradition, you'd think a crucified Christ, the risen Christ and the coming of the Holy Ghost, would have swept that away as a wind sweeps away the mist, but it didn't. Those Talmudic Christians followed along, believing in the traditions of the elders, the love the lip.

Now in Paul's mind, and in the mind of Jesus our Lord, there's a line sharply drawn between those who believe that righteousness is a formal thing. And those who believe that righteousness springs out of the heart. The Talmudists, the traditionalist believed it to be a formal thing. Now, I'm not condemning. I'm not scolding, I'm not adding anything. I am explaining what sound scholarship will confirm, that the Pharisees and Scribes of Jesus' day, the Judaizing brethren of Paul's day, which Paul writes here, call them circumcision, they believe as all religions believe that there has to be righteousness, that you've got to be righteous to please God. But now the question is, what is righteousness and what does righteousness consist in?

Well, they believe that righteousness was dietary, seasonal, ceremonial, and maybe ascetical. And there were four words here: what, when, how and how much. The dietary, that is what men eat or do not eat. And Paul said, they come and try to bother you with their eating and not eating. And he said, rather, I wouldn't say angrily, but sharply in verse fifteen, unto the pure all things are pure. But unto them that are defiled unbelieving, nothing is pure. But their minds and consciences are defiled.

So Paul said, now, I want you to appoint elders and appoint bishops in Crete in order that they might by bringing the sound Word of God to bear, they might clear the air and deliver these new Christians in Crete from dietary traditions. You're good if you eat this. You're not good if you eat that. I won't say it because I want to be kind, but can you think as we go along about certain great church or two, that are also under bondage or traditions, diets and times and seasons. Well, here we have the seasons that was when. What men do or do not eat, that's a dietary. When they're supposed to eat or not to eat that seasonal. How they dress and kneel and hold their hands and when they wash their hands or don't wash their hands, that ceremony. And how much they suffer and give, and how often they pray, and how long, and how often they fast and deprive themselves and punish themselves, that's ascetical.

So these four things, they all sprang out of self-righteousness and a misunderstanding of the grace of God: dietary, what men eat and what they don't eat; season, when they eat it and when they don't eat it; ceremonial, how they dress, how they kneel, how they stand, how they rise, how they get up; ascetical, how much they punish themselves. All of this was a part of the law of the lip, the tradition of the elders. And Jesus broke it, right and left. And they said, why do ye break our traditions? He said, why do you

break God's law with your traditions?

Now, some examples, by way of illustration from the Pharisees. You remember that passage where the disciples walked through the field on the Sabbath day. And as they walked, they reached out, the King James Version says corn, but it was wheat, they reached out and the heavy heads of wheat are hanging there. I can just see them from my boyhood days, heavy and yellow, ready to cut. And they just reached out as I've done a thousand times as a boy, took a couple of head roll, blew the chaff off and ate the wheat. That's the way to get it, you know, with none of the vitamins taken out. And those disciples did that.

And the Pharisees saw them do it. They should have been somewhere praying or helping the sick, but they were out spying on Jesus and His disciples to see if they could catch them on the breaking of the tradition. They said, now wait a minute here. We have a law that says you shan't thresh wheat on Sabbath day, and your threshing wheat. And Jesus turned on them and said the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, and He defended his poor, hungry disciples who had rubbed out some wheat and eaten it. But there you have it. They weren't interested in hungry disciples, they were interested in not breaking that law of the lip that says you can't rub, they actually went so far as to say, some of them did, I don't know whether it was universal or not. But some did, go so far as to say that you're not to walk on the grass on the Sabbath day because you're likely to trample on a head of grass and the seed will be crushed out of the head and that will be threshing. Therefore, stay off the grass and walk on the concrete on the Sabbath day, lest you thrash and if you're thrash, you're a sinner. You're ceremonially unclean, you're broken the tradition of the elders. Now that to you and me sounds silly. But to somebody brought up in that, it isn't as silly as it sounds. And they followed over the creek, mind you, and taught this kind of crazy business.

Then, Jesus here, you'll remember, He and his disciples didn't eat, didn't wash. I've seen men working in factories. They only had half an hour to eat, and they wanted to read a little or chat a little and they'd sit down, their hands are all covered with grease. I've seen fellows eat their lunch with greasy hands, perfectly harmless. To a Jew, it was terrible. They said, why, according not to the law of Moses, mind you, but according to the law of tradition, you're supposed to wash your hands before they eat. Jesus said, I don't want to recognize your traditions. I recognize the law of my Father and you're breaking the law of God all the time with your tradition. That's my answer to our friends over on the other side, the Catholics, I'm not against them. I love them. I'd cut their lawns. Lend them my hose. I'd do anything for them. But I am not going to allow them to put a yoke on my neck.

Now, remember another time, Jesus sat down with some sinners. Now, who were the sinners? Were the sinners. men who committed adultery, stole, lied, cheated widows out of their property and had bad tempers? No, those weren't considered sinners by the Pharisees. The sinners were those who didn't wash their hands before they ate. Who walked on the grass on Sunday. Who rubbed wheat in their hands and thrashed, and thus broke the love of fathers. Who didn't tie their clothing as they said they should have and who thus broke the law of the tradition, their law of the lip, the oral law, they were sinners.

But the Pharisee, who hated with a black hate that finally crucified Jesus, he was ceremonially clean, and that's a holy man. He kept a lot of the fathers. And a evil man who would rather a poor sick man would lie and suffered and died a tortured death than to be healed on the Sabbath day, he was not a sinner. He was a good man. He was a holy man because he kept the law of the fathers. And the men who finally crucified Jesus as Billy Sunday's old song used to say, passed off for moral men too. Righteousness to them, were those who are clean according to the ceremony. They did the thing they were supposed to do. They got up

when they're supposed to get up, sat when they're supposed to sit, put their hands up like this when they were told to, appeared when they were told to and did everything just as they were told to. They said, that's the tradition of the fathers.

Well, we have it on our hands today. It isn't affecting us here much. But wherever I see it, I like to leave the main path and go out and hew it down. We used to have a weed when I was a boy. My father called Wild Parsnip, but it was really a wild carrot. And he hated it so bad that if he was driving along the road, along the lane, and he saw one over in the field, he'd stopped the wagon, jump off, jump over the fence, go out, take an axe and cut it out at the roots, throw it up, and then drive on. And I feel that way about all these traditional laws they want to put on God's people and place righteousness where it doesn't belong.

I say there's a sharp line of demarcation drawn between those who believe that righteousness lies in formal law keeping and those who believe that righteousness springs out of faith, that it's a moral thing. That a liar can't be holy a man no matter how often he goes to church or makes his confession or gets confirmed, or how much he avoids meet on Friday or how he keeps the traditions of the elders. He's not a good man, if he's a liar. He's not a good man if he has hate in his heart. He's not a good man. If he has a churlish temper. He's not a good man. Let him be baptized anyway he wants to be baptized, sprinkle, poured, three times once, simmers, anyway, and he's not a good man if he's an evil man.

For faith, righteousness comes out of faith and out of love. And it has its source in the heart. That was the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's worshiping in spirit and in truth. And such have only one question. Those who worship in spirit and in truth have only one question. It isn't what shall I eat? When shall I do this? How shall I dress? How much shall I deprive myself? I've never asked those questions. That belongs to the traditions. You ask only one question and that is, why, why. That's motive, you see? Why? Why do I do this? Why? What's your motive for it? If you do it out of love, it's right. If you do it out of hate, it's wrong. If you do it out of faith, it's right. If you do it out of self-righteousness, it's wrong. What's the motive for this?

There's the liberty of the Christian my brethren. You can walk upright on the earth and look at God's sunshine, seeing the spacious firmament on high, and worship God and delight in his world and everything His hands has made. And you'll be all right before God as long as you keep your motive, right. Your motive is to do the will of God, to follow Jesus Christ as best you know how and to love everybody and to love God, your motive is alright. The question to not how much shall you eat but why, what shall I eat, but why? Not shall I go to church so many times a week, but why do I go to church? Motive is everything.

Now, by placing sin and holiness in formal ceremonies, these people destroyed the true meaning of both sin and righteousness. Because just as soon as I believe that I can cheat in a real estate deal, lie, abuse my wife, and do other things that are not right, hate my enemy, and yet I'm right with God provided I am baptized, fast at stated times, appear at the church at certain times, wash my hands before I eat and follow the ceremonial laws of the tradition of my church, I'm all right. I don't do that, I'm a sinner.

Who were the sinners in Jesus' day? They were the people who neglected the, they were the men on the street, the people who neglected the ceremonies of the Talmud. And Jesus said He came to save sinners. They were the ones that came to Him, the common people heard Him gladly and flocked to him. But the people who stood by the traditions, the law of the lip that over shadowed the love of God, couldn't reach them.

Now, in a climate, in a climate such as the Pharisees had and as these traditionalists tried to take to Crete, Christianity couldn't grow. The conscience couldn't live. It had to die because the conscience tells you, not what you're doing, but why you're doing it. Some little lady doesn't show up at church. Now I believe we ought to go to church every Sunday, I think it's the day, the first day of the week. And I think nothing short of sickness should keep us away from the church of God. I believe that. But many a person has been condemned for not being at church. Who is obeying the higher call of love? Who stayed by the bedside of an ailing aged father or mother? Or who did some other kindly deed for Christ's sake?

Now I think the wise thing to do is to try to do that at other times and get to church anyhow. I think the wise thing to do is to appear at church because the Scripture said to forsake not the assembling of yourselves together. I think God has given us the first day of the week as a time to appear, not as we're compelled to do it, but we do it voluntarily. But at the same time, there are occasions where a higher law of love keeps me from being at my wanted place. And God recognizes that higher law of love.

I've told it I suppose a hundred times, but old Meister Eckhart, somebody asked him, he said, how about praying and how do you how do you manage to harmonize prayer and service for the poor? Well, he said, here's the way I harmonize it. He said, if I'm in prayer, and I'm even caught away like Paul to the third heavens, and I happen to remember that I had forgotten to take a widow some food, I break off my prayer and go take her the food. He said, God will see you don't lose the thing. He said, when you come back, you can start right in where you left off and the Lord will see you don't lose thing. I believe in that. The law of love my brother, dictates that I do out of love, deeds that may not be written, may not be prescribed, may not be found at all in the law of the church, but there are the obvious wise, right good thing to do, and I do them for Christ's sake. That's the righteous man.

Now, Paul said I want to read that I'm about finished. He said that these Jewish fables and commandments of men that turn from the Truth, he said unto the pure all things are pure, to the pure person, everything's pure. They came and said, now you can't eat this kind of meat and Paul said, don't you believe it. To the pure everything's pure. But unto them that are defiled and unbelieving in their heart, you see, nothing's pure. To the Pharisee, he fasted but his fasting was impure. He prayed, but his prayers came back and slapped his own face. He deprived himself but his deep privation was a sin because his motives were rotten. They profess they know God but in words they deny Him being abominable and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate, that's terrible. That's terrible.

And spoken about the poor Jews, they of the circumcision. Do you often pray for Israel. Do you often pray for the Jews. You should. You should often pray for the Jews. Remember, they gave us our Bible. They preserved that Bible and died defending it down the years. Remember it? Remember, they carefully preserved it and went over it and put every jot and every tittle in place, the old scribes. We use the word scribe almost as an epithet of opprobrium. But those scribes, we owe them a lot just as we owe are translators a lot. Careful scholars who spend days over sentences. We owe them a lot. We thank God for Moses and Isaiah and Daniel and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and sweet David with his harp. We're grateful for the Jews. We're grateful for those twelve apostles, all Jews who went out to the four corners of the earth to preach the Truth. We're grateful for Paul that great Jew. We're glad. We ought to pray for them, and pray for them off, and much and pity them. And don't feel superior to them.

Because after all, you're a gentile grafted into the wild, to the olive tree. Paul would have none of this stuff in Crete. None of this, none of this tradition out of which he escaped by the skin of his teeth. It took a knock-down and drag-out conversion on Damascus Road to save him from it. Now that God had taken

him out of it, I've been getting letters recently. Some time ago, we published an article, "How to win, one of our missionaries, "How to Win Roman Catholics to Christ." I suppose I'd get skinned for that. My poor hides all spotted with what I get. But I've got nothing but the most gracious, the most enthusiastic letters from people saying, some of them saying to this effect, Oh, you don't know how glad we were to read this, that your people are interested in winning Catholics to Christ. And they have written articles for me about how to win them, all the kind things they said and gracious things they said. How never to offend them, but how always to take the word of God and your own testimony and go to them and try to win them. But almost all of them said the same thing. How we thank God we escaped. It was almost like a concentration camp. And when they got out into the liberty of the gospel of Jesus Christ, they only could use one word and that was the word escape. They said we escaped.

And how we thank God we escaped. So, I'm glad I've escaped, that I have escaped from the laws of the elders. But we must pray for those who haven't. And we must by love and faith and grace and careful walk, not to offend people. We must live such lives as shall be worthy of the liberty we claim to hold and not use liberty as a license for the flesh. But in meekness and humility, follow our Lord Jesus Christ. If we do that, God will bless us and we may be used by Him to deliver some who are now in bondage.

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