

June 17
Lesson 3 (NIV)

JESUS TEACHES

ABOUT JUSTICE

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Mark 7:1-13](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Matthew 15:1-9](#); [Mark 7:1-13](#)

MATTHEW 15:1-9

¹ Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”

³ Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ ⁵ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ ⁶ they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:



⁸ ““These people honor me with their lips,
 but their hearts are far from me.
⁹ They worship me in vain;
 their teachings are merely human rules.””

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KEY VERSE

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.—[Matthew 15:8](#)

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the nature of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees in today’s text.
2. Explain how human traditions and institutions can hinder a person from responding to God’s message.
3. Identify a behavior that is based on improper motives, and make a plan for change.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. I Was Misquoted!
- B. Lesson Background

I. Outer Cleanliness ([MATTHEW 15:1, 2](#))

- A. Approaching Jesus ([v. 1](#))
- B. Accusing the Disciples ([v. 2](#))

II. Inner Corruption ([MATTHEW 15:3-9](#))

- A. Specific Example ([vv. 3-6a](#))
- B. Sad Result ([vv. 6b-9](#))
 - Our Traditions or His Touch?*
 - Lip Service?*

Conclusion

- A. Devoted to What?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. I Was Misquoted!

Public figures sometimes find themselves defending controversial or offensive statements. Often their defense is to say, “I was misquoted.” Of course, our experience with the media shows that they are in some cases right.

We who are not celebrities know the frustration of being misquoted. Parents hear their children twist their words to use against them. Angry spouses sometimes do the same. On the job, a worker claims to be following instructions while the boss insists that those instructions were misunderstood. Misquoting, misunderstanding, misremembering, or just ignoring other people’s words is a common cause of conflict.

When we are misquoted and misunderstood, we want to shout, “That’s not what I meant, and you should know that!” We value our words and their integrity. We become exasperated when we are misunderstood, and we become discouraged at the hard feelings that often follow.

God experiences misunderstanding as well. Some of the Bible’s sternest messages are directed at those who have received God’s Word but have misunderstood and misapplied it. They claim devotion to God, but their actions reveal more interest in their own will than in his.

Today’s lesson features one of God’s stern messages. We study it to ensure that we do not resemble the group against which it was originally directed.

B. Lesson Background

Jesus was confronted often by Pharisees and teachers of the law, or scribes, during his earthly ministry. Of the four Gospels, the frequency of their mention together in Matthew is fully equal to the other three Gospels combined.

Teachers of the law/scribes were experts in the Law of Moses and the traditions about its application. In Jesus’ time, these learned men could quote large sections of Scripture and could cite the opinions of renowned experts on interpretation.

Pharisees took a distinct approach to the Law of Moses. Their movement arose about 150 years before Jesus’ birth, in response to what many saw as the corruption of the high priesthood in the temple at Jerusalem. Pharisees believed that God would restore his blessing on Israel only when Israel kept God’s law faithfully.

To ensure that people kept the law, the Pharisees developed many traditions that had the effect of building a fence around it. The idea was that if the traditions were followed, then a person wouldn’t even come close to breaking some part of God’s law. To illustrate, Pharisees might teach that to avoid taking God’s name in vain (and thus violate [Exodus 20:7](#)), one should play it safe by not uttering his name under any circumstances whatsoever.

Among these add-on traditions was a custom of washing hands before meals. Today we wash hands before eating as a means of hygiene. For the Pharisees, the custom was not an issue of physical hygiene but ceremonial religious washing. The Law of Moses required priests to wash their hands and feet before performing tabernacle duties ([Exodus 30:17-21](#)). The Pharisees seem to have built a fence around this law by expecting every faithful Israelite to perform a similar ceremonial washing before every meal; this treated meals as though they were acts of worship in the temple. To eat without having performed this ceremonial washing was to eat unclean food.

While Christians today often think of Pharisees as evil because of their opposition to Jesus, in his day they were highly respected. We should also remember that not all Pharisees opposed Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who desired a private meeting with Jesus ([John 3:1, 2](#)) and later assisted in his burial ([19:38-42](#)). A number of Pharisees became Christians, though some still struggled with their understanding of the Law of Moses and its application to Christians of Gentile background ([Acts 15:3-6](#)). Most notable of the Christian Pharisees was the apostle Paul. Years after his conversion, he continued to refer to himself as a Pharisee ([23:6](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Gentile *Jen-tile*.

Hosea *Ho-zay-uh*.

Leviticus *Leh-vit-ih-kus*.

Moses *Mo-zes* or *Mo-zez*.

Nicodemus *Nick-uh-dee-mus*.

Pharisees *Fair-ih-seez*.

I. Outer Cleanliness

([MATTHEW 15:1, 2](#))

A. Approaching Jesus (v. 1)

1. Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked,

Jesus has had many confrontations with *Pharisees and teachers of the law* already in this Gospel ([Matthew 9:3, 11, 34; 12:2, 14, 24](#)). In most instances their opposition to Jesus arises as he offers controversial teaching or performs a miraculous deed that defies the religious leaders’ standards. Here the initiative comes from the opponents.

The fact that these men come *from Jerusalem*, the center of Israel’s religious life, suggests that Jesus has drawn the attention of the nation’s most important religious leaders. Ultimately he will go to Jerusalem and surrender himself to his enemies to be put to death. Here we see a glimpse of the opposition that will grow increasingly hostile toward him.

What Do You Think?

How should you conduct yourself when in the presence of someone who thrives on religious controversy?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

If the person challenges you while others are present

If the person challenges you privately

If the person challenges someone else

B. Accusing the Disciples (v. 2)

2. **“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don’t wash their hands before they eat!”**

The teachers of the law and Pharisees pose a question to Jesus, one that could be taken as a serious inquiry. But the question strongly implies accusation and criticism. These leaders do not simply ask why Jesus’ *disciples* do not *wash their hands before* eating or how Jesus regards the practice of handwashing. Rather, they assert that Jesus’ followers have broken a certain *tradition of the elders*—the elders being godly men well versed in God’s law.

Many traditions of the Pharisees in Jesus’ time are a few generations old. Others are relatively new. All are constantly debated. But the Pharisees teach that their traditions had their origins in a law delivered by God to Moses by spoken word and passed on to experts in each successive generation by spoken word.

Effectively, then, the religious leaders are claiming that these traditions are oral law having authority equal to the written Law of Moses. Both the written law and the oral law have thus come from God. So the question posed to Jesus implies strong condemnation for violating not just a human tradition but a tradition of divine origin, a command of God.

What Do You Think?

How can we make sure that our church’s traditions serve the intent of the Word of God and not the other way around?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding worship traditions
- Regarding holiday traditions
- Regarding traditional times for services
- Other

II. Inner Corruption

(MATTHEW 15:3-9)

A. Specific Example (vv. 3-6a)

3. **Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?”**

Jesus’ response indicts the Pharisees and teachers of the law for breaking God’s law with their traditions. These traditions are wrong, Jesus says, and not simply because they claim an authority that God did not grant them. They are wrong because they lead to the actual breaking of God’s true law, as Jesus proceeds to illustrate.

What Do You Think?

Which, if either, is the bigger danger: adding to God’s commandments or disregarding them? How can we avoid both extremes?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In contexts dealing with personal obligation
- In contexts dealing with obligations of the church as a body
- Considering [Revelation 22:18, 19](#)

4a. **“For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’**

To demonstrate how tradition leads to the breaking of God’s true law, Jesus quotes from the written law, specifically the fifth of the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 20:12](#); [Deuteronomy 5:16](#)). To honor one’s parents means more than just showing them respect and obedience. It means that as parents grow older, their children assume responsibility for their care. Aging parents cannot simply be ignored because they no longer contribute to the livelihood of the family.

4b. **“and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’**

[Leviticus 20:9](#) is quoted. The fact that capital punishment is the responsibility of the entire community ([20:2](#); [24:16](#); etc.) places great restraint on such action; the entire community and its leaders must be convinced of the guilt and the appropriateness of the punishment. It is therefore unlikely that disrespectful children often receive this severe punishment. But the fact that the law has this instruction shows the seriousness of the command to honor father and mother.

What Do You Think?

What should honoring one’s parents look like in terms of witness to culture?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- When we are with them in public
- When they have needs
- When they disappoint us
- Considering [Luke 14:26](#); [Ephesians 6:1-3](#); [1 Timothy 5:4, 8](#); [1 Peter 2:12](#)
- Other

5. **“But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’**

Jesus now cites a tradition common among the Pharisees. Sources outside the New Testament show that the Pharisees have developed a custom by which a person can make a gift to the temple of a valuable possession, but keep the use of that possession until the owner dies.

Jesus notes how this custom provides a loophole that many exploit for their own gain. The tradition of dedicating that possession as a gift to the temple means that it cannot be used for the parents’ benefit, as it belongs to the temple. But the gift remains in the custody of the giver as long as the giver lives. Therefore the giver can receive all the profit from the possession for the rest of his life.

6a. **“they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it.**

By following this tradition of providing a gift to the temple, a person appears to be very godly and generous. Sacrificing a valuable possession to support the worship of God seems a fine thing to do. But it can come at the price of disobeying God’s direct command to love and care for one’s parents. How can a person claim to honor God while dishonoring the parents through whom God brought that person into the world?

B. Sad Result (vv. 6b-9)

6b. **“Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.**

To *nullify the word of God* is to make it empty and void of meaning. Of course, the handwashing tradition that has allegedly been violated by Jesus’ disciples seems much less serious. It comes at little personal cost and seems to do very little harm. Those who follow it may appear to be honoring God by treating their ordinary meals like acts of worship in the temple.

But all of these traditions distract God’s people from the real focus of their devotion. Such traditions make the law hard, but righteousness easy. Additional rules are hard to remember and follow. But if a person does follow them, that person is deemed righteous.

God’s law to Israel, on the other hand, is a constant reminder of the people’s unrighteousness. The laws are simple, but Israel has continually abandoned them. The law points out that failure, leaving only one alternative: turning to God in repentance and seeking his merciful forgiveness.

The traditions of the elders interrupt that process. Only by confronting the law itself can the law’s purpose be fulfilled and the people of God receive the blessing they falsely seek by keeping human traditions.

OUR TRADITIONS OR HIS TOUCH?

Mildred was very upset. Her sense of the dignity of worship had been disrupted. After 40 years of sitting in one spot in the sanctuary, she moved to the other side of the aisle. Why? Wayne, a newcomer, had the annoying habit of loudly saying “Amen!” or “Praise the Lord!” while the minister was preaching. Wayne would also raise his hands during worship time, and he was known to jump to his feet on occasion and shout “Hallelujah!”

“That kind of thing has never been done in this church before,” said Mildred, “and it is totally unnecessary! The man is just trying to draw attention to himself!”

Nothing could have been further from the truth. Wayne was just an excited Christian. The preacher appreciated his affirmations. He knew that at least one person was listening! But the conflict continued to grow in Mildred’s mind.

One Sunday, she finally had had enough. She confronted Wayne in the foyer. “I’ll have you know that in the New Testament it is not reported one time that Jesus ever jumped to his feet and shouted ‘Hallelujah!’ If he didn’t do it, then we shouldn’t either!”

Wayne reflected briefly, then simply replied, “What you say may be true. Perhaps Jesus never did leap up and shout ‘Hallelujah!’ But I’ll tell you another truth, Mildred. Every person who was ever touched by Jesus certainly did!”

Wayne worshipped as he did only because he could feel the Master’s hand on him. Maybe it is time to break with some of the traditions of the church in favor of the touch of his hand.

—C. T.

7. **“You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:**

Jesus’ use of the term *hypocrites* for the Pharisees has become so well known that to say “hypocrite” or “Pharisee” is, for many, to say the same thing. The term *hypocrite* prior to Jesus was used for actors on the Greek stage. Actors pretend to be someone they are not. Jesus uses the term to criticize the Pharisees and teachers of the law for their pretending to honor God with their traditions while using the traditions to disobey God’s commands.

What Do You Think?

Is the familiar question “What would Jesus do?” a proper guide for determining whether to call someone a hypocrite? Why, or why not?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When others are present
In private

Jesus uses the word *hypocrites* to introduce a quotation from the Old Testament prophet *Isaiah*. By saying that *Isaiah was right when he prophesied about these teachers of the law and Pharisees*, Jesus is saying that the prophet’s words apply just as much to Jesus’ contemporaries as they did to the people of *Isaiah’s* time centuries earlier. What had happened among God’s people in *Isaiah’s* day is now happening again during Jesus’ ministry.

8. **“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.**

Jesus’ quotation comes from *Isaiah 29*. There the prophet was addressing God’s people at a time when Israel was under grave threat from a foreign power. *Isaiah* warned that because of Israel’s unfaithfulness, God would allow pagan nations to take the people captive, exiling them from the land of promise. The chapter begins with a stark warning of invasion and destruction to come.

Then in *Isaiah 29:13*, where this quotation is found, the prophet gives the reason for the coming judgment. Israel, *these people* who were called as God’s people, outwardly made a great show of their devotion to God. But inwardly they were far from God. They lived as if God could be bribed with offerings and sacrifices while remaining unaware of the thoughts and motives that lay behind the acts of devotion. As another prophet said, God desires not sacrifice but mercy (*Hosea 6:6*), a text that Jesus also quotes to his opponents (*Matthew 9:13; 12:7; lesson 1*).

LIP SERVICE?

Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997), also known as Mother Teresa, is legendary for her generous work with orphans, the poor, and the terminally ill. She was constantly on the move, helping wherever she could. She fought tirelessly for the underprivileged. She raised the funds necessary to expand a growing ministry. The prize money accompanying her Nobel Peace Prize went directly to caring for the poor of Calcutta.

The world saw what she was doing and beat a path to her door. While others were asking what should be done about those poor folks in Calcutta, Teresa was doing it. Her ministry was not large at first. She took in one child off the streets—then another, and another, and another.

We do a lot of talking about what needs to happen in our churches and in our world. We call that *lip service*. Every hand would be raised if the average congregation were asked “Who believes in evangelism?” But very few hands would be raised if the follow-up question were “How many are personally involved in evangelism?”

The outcome would likely be the same for visiting the sick and the widows. Or for praying. Or for biblical giving. It’s not hard to see the trend here. Every person will quickly confess with his or her mouth those principles known to be true. But how many Christians actually practice the truths they say they believe?

—C. T.

9. “They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”

The quotation of Isaiah continues, and now we see how appropriate this text is for addressing the issue at hand. In Jesus’ time, the religious leaders have elevated traditions of their own making to an importance that supersedes even the most obvious and important of God’s commandments. Those traditions provide an outward veneer of religiosity that leaves people insensitive to their need to seek and rely on God’s mercy in their weakness and failure. What may have started out as a good means to an end has become a bad end in and of itself.

The result is that for both Isaiah’s audience and Jesus’ opponents, their worship of God is *vain*; that is, empty and meaningless. God has no use for acts of devotion that are merely outward. True devotion to God comes from the heart, in response to God’s grace. It then expresses itself in sincere obedience to God’s commands and in demonstrating that same grace on a daily, consistent basis.

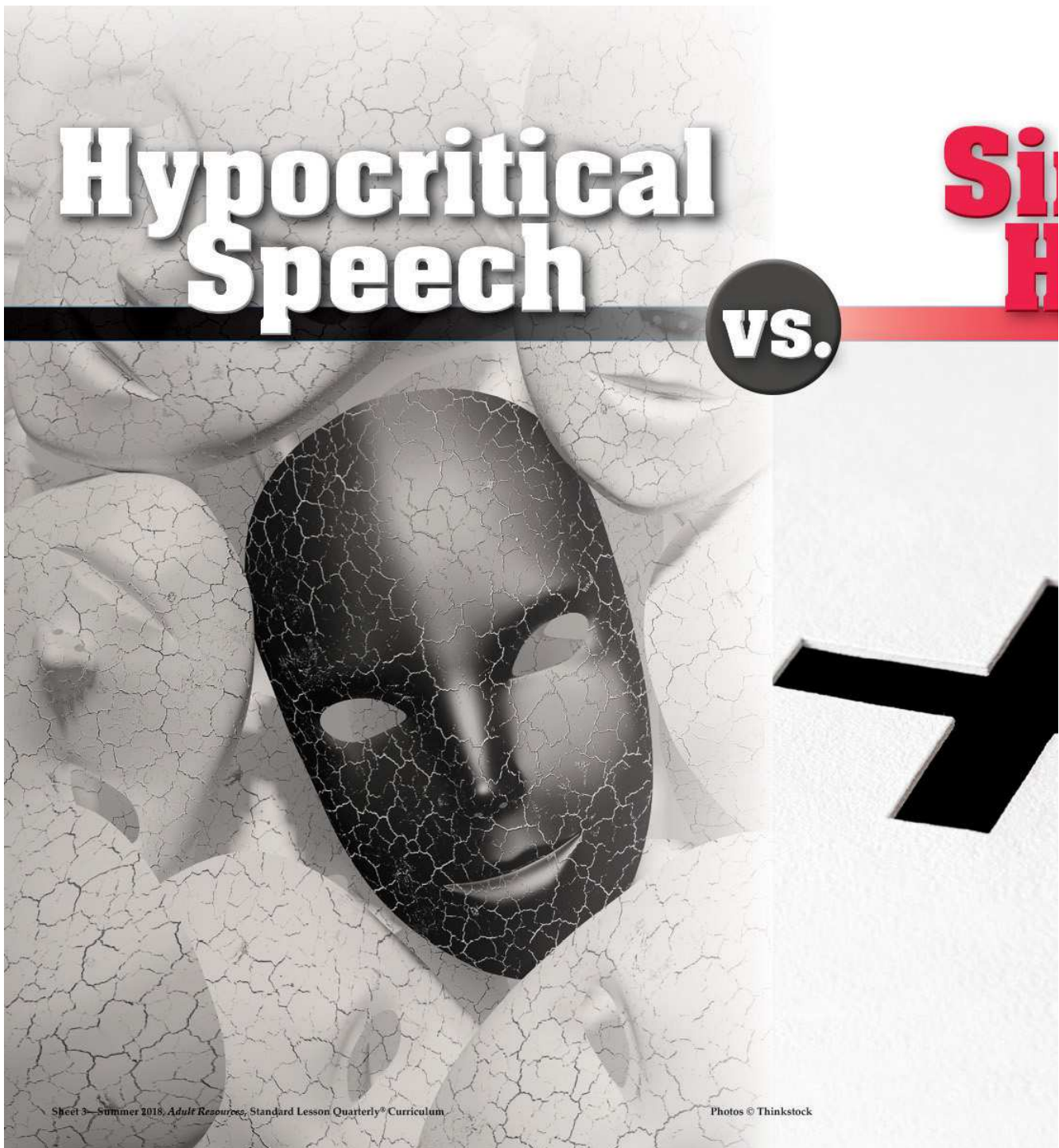
Conclusion

A. Devoted to What?

As Jesus continued his teaching on this occasion, he told his disciples that what comes out of a person’s mouth makes the person clean or unclean, not the food that goes into a person ([Matthew 15:10, 11](#)). This teaching became vitally important to the church after Jesus’ resurrection.

As the gospel was shared with Gentiles, who did not keep Israel’s laws of clean and unclean foods (let alone the handwashing tradition), the church struggled to maintain unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jesus’ teaching reminded everyone that obedience to the God who had given his Spirit to the Gentiles meant uniting with them in fellowship around the dinner table (compare [Galatians 2:12, 13](#)). All people and all foods had become clean ([Mark 7:18, 19](#); [Acts 10:9-16, 28](#)).

Jesus’ encounters with the teachers of the law and Pharisees continued after the incident in today’s text. As Jesus’ death approached, he delivered a stinging rebuke of them ([Matthew 23:1-36](#)). They made a show of their devotion because they cared more about people’s opinions than about honoring God. They looked righteous on the outside, but inside was spiritual filth. Most of all, the Pharisees prevented others from finding God’s blessing in Jesus. By extolling themselves and their traditions, they drew people away from the one whom God had sent to make them clean inside and out. Because they claimed to be teachers of God’s people but in fact worked against God’s purpose, Jesus criticized them severely.



Sheet 3—Summer 2018, *Adult Resources*, Standard Lesson Quarterly® Curriculum

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Visual for Lesson 3. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask learners what the images represent and how to distinguish between them.

Jesus saw in his time what Isaiah had seen in his: people who claimed to be faithful to God but whose primary devotion was to human traditions and institutions. That should make us realize how easy it is to do the same in any time and place. It is easy to point the finger of condemnation at others whom we believe to be hypocrites. But we do well to realize that the same may be true of us. Our true devotion may be not to God but to human traditions—forms of worship, rules of behavior, or teachings of our favorite preachers.

That misplaced devotion may prevent us from reckoning with our need for God's cleansing, to be made truly clean not by what people see on the outside but by what Christ does to us on the inside. Only after we are cleansed within can God's love flow out of us to a world that badly needs it.

B. Prayer

Our Father, we confess that we often rely on our own ideas instead of your grace. Cleanse us by the blood of Christ on the inside, so that our outward deeds may reflect your true nature and will. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Make sure your traditions neither add to
nor subtract from God's Word.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

On the board write the following words: *Job, Church Building, Gym Class, Opera*. Bring to class the following items inside a bag: sneakers, man's tie, a pair of jeans, a fancy shawl or scarf, backpack, baseball cap. Draw out one item at a time, writing its name on the board, and putting checks under each category where it *might* be appropriate. Discuss how dress codes can be very different depending on prevailing traditions. Ask students to share experiences where they or someone they know dressed in an inappropriate manner for the location.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Looking for Loopholes" activity from the reproducible page, which can be downloaded. Have a volunteer read the scenario aloud. Then ask for a show of hands as to which solution is correct. (It is B.)

After either activity, make the following statement: "Whether dress codes or laws are clearly stated or only implied, some people will try to find ways around them. The Pharisees were guilty of that, and Jesus called them on it in today's lesson."

Into the Word

Have students form small groups. Give each group a copy of the Lesson Background, and ask them to work through the following questions under the title "What Did the Pharisees Believe?" Do not include the answers in italics. (1) When would God restore his blessing on Israel? (*Only when the people were carefully keeping God's law.*) (2) What did the Pharisees do to help them keep the law? (*Developed a large collection of traditions as a fence around the scriptural laws.*) (3) Why was washing hands one of the traditions? (*It was similar to what was required of the priests and had the effect of making meals acts of worship.*) Discuss.

On the board write the two words *Charge* and *Countercharge*. Ask for two volunteers: one to read aloud the text from [Matthew 15:1-9](#) and one to read the parallel passage from [Mark 7:1-13](#). Then ask the following questions and jot responses under *Charge*. Expected responses are in italics. "What charge did the Pharisees bring against Jesus' disciples?" (*The disciples ate without washing their hands.*) "Why were the Pharisees so upset about this issue?" (*The disciples were breaking tradition.*)

Then ask the following question and jot responses under *Countercharge*. "What four countercharges did Jesus bring against the Pharisees?" (*A-They negated the commands of God with their traditions. B-They authorized gifts to the temple that excused the givers from honoring and caring for parents. C-They were hypocrites. D-They pretended to honor God, but were more concerned with human rules.*)

Conclude by asking, "Instead of helping people keep the law, how did the traditions of the Pharisees prevent them from doing so?" Discuss.

Into Life

Then say, "The Pharisees' traditions, which were created to help people keep the law, sometimes ended up being used as loopholes for not keeping the law. But usually, the traditions were just too burdensome in going above and beyond God's stated requirements. Let's consider some questions along that line."

Form students into small groups and distribute index cards you have prepared with the following questions, one per card. "How do traditions that start with good intentions end up being harmful?" "Does the word *tradition* strike you as a negative word in and of itself? Why, or why not?" "What is the difference, if any, between the Pharisees' traditions and modern church traditions involving Christmas and Easter?"

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Excuses, Excuses!" activity from the reproducible page. Have students pair off to discuss it.