

Session #9

The Upside-Down Kingdom

Anniversary Edition

By

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Chapter 8

Impious Piety

Why was Jesus killed? Why would a preacher of compassion get nailed to a tree? His critique of the rich offers one clue to this riddle. Yet his message went far beyond wealth. Jesus announced the in-breaking of a new kingdom and a new order that promised to turn things upside down and inside out. His bold challenge of some religious traditions and of Jewish nationalism also helped to seal his fate.

Jesus was a Jewish prophet standing firm on the Mosaic traditions—even as he proclaimed that God was moving beyond them, transforming them in new ways to fulfill their purpose. The Spirit of God would transform sacred symbols—Sabbath observance, purity rituals, sacred boundaries, and yes, even the mighty temple in Jerusalem.

Many of the practices surrounding these symbols served to bolster tribal and national identity. The new kingdom would have wider doors, longer tables, and a much bigger family. The old ways created tribal identity through separation and exclusion. The new order welcomed everyone. Jesus' condemnation of the traditions that privileged sacred symbols and religious ritual above human need thickened the plot that led to Jesus' death.

Background Information

Jesus' position on and reaction to the oral tradition is explained in the first section of this book. There are a few facts you should be aware of as you read.

The Torah was written by Moses in one of the many variations of the ancient Hebrew language.

The Torah includes the five Books of Moses
(Genesis-Deuteronomy).

The Torah was written only in Hebrew until Ptolemy 2, the son of one of Alexander the Great's generals who reigned in Egypt.

Some Jewish sages commented that the day the Torah was translated into Greek 'was as difficult for the Jewish people as the day when the Golden Calf was made.'

The Greek translation of the Torah called the Septuagint, was completed for distribution in 282 B.C.

“At the time of Jesus, there were actually two Torahs, or two types of religious law, written and oral. Both Sadducees and Pharisees accepted the written Torah (the five Books of Moses) as the holy law of God. It contained the commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. In addition, an unwritten Torah—passed by word of mouth from generation to generation—served as a how-to manual of sorts. The scribes had developed the oral law, and by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees followed it to the letter. The oral law evolved through three stages—Midrash, Mishnah, and Talmud.

The first step, or Midrash, emerged after the Jews returned to their homeland from Babylonian captivity five centuries before the birth of Jesus. The Midrash was a verse-by-verse commentary explaining the written Scripture. This vast corpus was preserved orally across the generations. It was not written down until after the time of Jesus.

A second form of oral interpretation, known as Mishnah, emerged in the two centuries before Jesus. Instead of an exact verse commentary, it applied the Torah more broadly to practical issues not mentioned in holy writ.

Nearly two centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the oral traditions were gradually written in what became the Talmud. This stirred fierce controversy, since many rabbis considered writing the law the same as burning it. The Talmud, this final collection of wisdom and oral law, became the distinctive book of Judaism, comparable in a sense to Christianity's New Testament.

“The oral law, or ‘Tradition of the elders’ (Mark 7:5), aimed to clarify and interpret the written words of Moses. At first the oral tradition was subordinated to the authority of the Scriptures. But over the years the authority of the oral law grew. In time it was said that God had given the oral law to Moses and preserved it by divine providence over the generations. The oral tradition soon assumed equal, if not greater, authority than the written word. The scope of the oral law is astonishing. A later written compilation of the Mishnah had some seven hundred pages of small print!

Sadducees accepted only the authority of the ancient written law without any oral commentary. This enabled them to accommodate the Romans and accept other outside influences because the Books of Moses didn’t address such issues.

By adhering only to the written word and some ritual regulations, the Sadducees could operate the Jerusalem temple even as they flirted with the Romans. The diplomatic Sadducees compromised, working hand in glove with the Romans to maintain the status quo for financial gain. In many ways, the Sadducees were the political, economic, and religious conservatives.

The **Pharisees**, on the other hand, cared about applying the law to new issues, and they honored the Mosaic covenant by obeying the oral law. Carefully they followed the rules of ritual purity and tithing. Scrupulously they observed pious regulations, hoping that someday all Jewish people would follow their example.

The Pharisees had a noble vision: they yearned to create a holy nation, a nation of priests. The Pharisees were sincerely progressive! They truly wanted the Mosaic vision to blossom in the corporate life of Judaism.

“Jesus struck at the heart of oral tradition. He appeared irreverent to religious leaders because he scorned religious rituals that obscured God’s love. He broke the rules of piety by ‘working’ on the Sabbath. He disregarded the ritual cleansing. He mingled with disreputable people, and he purged the temple. His attacks focused on the abusive and exclusive nature of:

The Sabbath

Religious Contamination

Pompous Piety

Pride and Humility

The Last Will Be First

The Temple

Brittle Skins And New Patches

The biblical shift from 'kingdom' to 'church' between the Gospels and the Epistles reflects a shift from Jewish to Greek culture. Drawing distinctions between kingdom, church, culture, and structure helps to clarify the conceptual waters. The kingdom Jesus announced points us beyond ourselves and the organizations we construct. We've already noted that the kingdom refers to the rule of God in our hearts and relationships. God was 'at hand' in Jesus, whose life and words invited people to embrace the kingdom's arrival. Today the Holy Spirit's presence points us in kingdom directions. The wine in the parable symbolizes God's dynamic power infiltrating our lives. Like fresh wine in ferment, God's Spirit energizes kingdom living.

The kingdom entails a new vision, a new set of values, and a new openness to yield to the ways of God. In the past, present, and future, the kingdom is the reign of God in the lives of believers. It becomes visible in form and practice as persons yield their lives to God's creative Spirit.

The church is the network of kingdom citizens who welcome God's reign in their hearts and relationships. It's the body of Christ, the disciples who follow in the way of Jesus. We can also envision the church as a community of believers linked together in many different ways. The church is not a building, a sanctuary, or a program. It's not an organization. It's a fellowship, a local and worldwide community of believers who encourage each other to live by Jesus' values. The church gives witness to God's worldwide kingdom.