

Traditions: Good Or Bad?

One of my favourite movies is *Ever After* with Drew Barrymore and Anjelica Huston. It has all the right ingredients for a great story – humour, romance, drama and a feel-good ending. When I think of this movie, I have a few favourite scenes that top my list, but the one where Danielle’s father leaves to go abroad and stops at the gate to wave often plays through my mind. Perhaps because it’s such a bittersweet moment. As the audience, we know what’s coming but Danielle doesn’t. Perhaps because it speaks so clearly of the love of a parent for their child and the pain that separation from each other brings. And perhaps, also, for the line that Danielle quotes as she waits for what she expects her father will do:

“Wait! It’s tradition. He always waves at the gate.”

What Are Traditions?

Our lives are full of traditions; from cultural and religious traditions to social and family traditions.

‘Traditions’ are described as inherited, established, or customary patterns of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom) or a belief or story or a body of beliefs or stories relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable.” They can also be “the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction”, “cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions”, or “characteristic manner, method, or style”. – Merriam-Webster Dictionary

The word “tradition” derives from the [Latin](#) *tradere* literally meaning *to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping.*

Traditions are, then, often important customs, stories or information, passed down from generation to generation as a means of safekeeping those beliefs or customs. They may have been originally passed through oral communication including methods such as storytelling and poetry, rhyme and alliteration.

Sometimes the meaning behind a tradition becomes lost but the tradition or custom remains. Sometimes a greater meaning becomes attached to a tradition than was originally intended or implied. The following is an lighthearted story highlighting how traditions or customs sometimes come about:

*A woman was preparing the evening's roast dinner and divided the large piece of meat into two smaller, equal portions, placing them in separate trays in the oven. When her husband asked her why she did it that way, she replied that she actually didn't know – it was just the way her mother had always done it. That got her thinking and later that evening, she phoned her mother to find out the reason behind the two trays of meat. Her own mother didn't know either, it was just what **her** mother had always done. They decided to phone the woman's grandmother and, when asked what was so important about dividing the meat, she laughed and replied. "oh, nothing. I just never had an oven large enough to fit my entire portion of meat on one rack. Dividing it in two simply meant I could fit it all in my oven at the same time."*

In this situation, practical requirements had, by the third generation, become something of a tradition within the family without any actual particular significance behind the tradition.

Even amongst the animal kingdom, traditions can be observed. Behavioral traditions are seen in groups of fish, birds, and mammals, such as orangutans and chimpanzees. In fact, chimpanzees will actually transfer traditional behavior

from one group to another (not just within a group).

Human beings are hyper-social animals, albeit a lot smarter (most of the time!) than the animal world but even we come together through shared practices, traditions and rituals. These traditions form a social glue that binds groups within our society and often provides benefits such as increasing family bonds and forming a strong group identity. Traditions often offer a sense of belonging for individuals.

Traditions: Good Or Bad?

Traditions can sometimes be viewed in a negative light. They are also frequently used in political or religious discussions to establish the legitimacy of a particular set of values. However, it's important to remember that traditions, in themselves, are neither good or bad. Just because something is replicated or repeated, doesn't mean it **isn't** of value or importance. Conversely, just because something is replicated or repeated doesn't mean that it **is** important or valuable.

Traditions matter when they relate to important human values, such as faith, freedom, integrity, education, personal responsibility, a strong work ethic or selflessness. They provide context for thoughtful reflection and a deeper appreciation of the things that matter in life. Traditions are a language unto themselves; with a meaning that conveys something deeper.

What Does The Bible Say About Traditions?

[Religion](#) is a place when traditions abound and they often form a rich tapestry in the life of a religious person. They are often drawn from history and have meaning and symbolism behind them. In the Old Testament, traditions and symbols actually pointed forward to a greater truth regarding Jesus, [his work as Saviour](#) and God's [relationship with humanity](#).

Jesus himself instituted the tradition commonly known as The Last Supper, a fellowship meal where his followers would eat bread and drink wine 'in remembrance of him' (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 13). This tradition is still observed today, some 2000 years later.

Many cultures have traditions at the heart of their spiritual and religious worship and Christianity is no different. The Bible never condemns traditions of themselves but Jesus' words in Mark 7:6-8 tell us clearly that traditions shouldn't ever supercede God's will.

"He (Jesus) replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." (Mark 7:6-8), NIV

Christ's words indicate that He was not condemning human tradition, but *those who place human traditions, laws, or demands before God's will* expressed in the commandments.

The letter of Paul to the believers in Colosse confirms Jesus' words:

*"See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ."
– Colossians 2:8, ESV*

The Old Testament dealt with this problem too, where rituals had replaced righteousness and justice:

"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look

upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” – Amos 5:21-25, ESV

Traditions or rituals shouldn't come before our relationship with God and customs should never supercede God's commandments. When a tradition forms a valuable and significant part of our worship, spiritual life and our human experience, then it's good that it's observed. But when traditions are human traditions, unrelated to our relationship with God, then their significance and priority is not always important and their observance is neither required nor expected by God in our spiritual life.

There are certain traditions, though, relating to faith and morals that Christians are commanded to keep and obey:

“I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you.” – 1 Corinthians 11:2, CSB

“So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.” – 2 Thessalonians 2:15, ESV

We can therefore view traditions as beautiful and meaningful additions to our human life, perpetuating things that matter and ideas that are worth conveying through the generations. But these traditions should never be confused as being superior to the traditions that God is actually looking for in the life of a Christian person; the traditions of “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23)

“There is a real beauty to be found in tradition – a beauty that may not propel us forward in the sense of quantifiable “progress” or change, but that does propel us forward as human beings in life wisdom, understanding and even emotional intellect. Indeed, aside from the more obvious – albeit equally important – function of tradition as a way to pass on the values, morals, customs and culture of one generation to the next, tradition also teaches us something about life, where we came from and who we are as people.” – [Huffington Post](#)