

Honor God With Your Heart

Mark 7:1-13 (Key Verse: 7:6b)

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

The event in today's passage took place in Galilee and it is here where a Gentile ministry is hinted at. Therefore, it is fitting that at this moment Jesus deals with the issue of ceremonial cleanliness as practiced by the Jews. This issue arises at the instigation of the Pharisees, who come from Jerusalem to accuse Jesus. They emphasize external compliance to rituals based on the traditions of the elders. Jesus answers them with a declarative teaching that, what really makes a person unclean is not eating certain foods, or contact with external objects, but sin in the heart. True purity and reconciliation with God can only be attained by a transformation of the human heart. Jesus made it very evident in his teachings that transformed hearts, not customs and ceremonies, would be the basis of the Christian faith. Afterwards, when he sent his disciples out into the world to proclaim the gospel, it was not to impose external ceremonial law compliance but rather to effect inward change. How can we genuinely honor God in our hearts? Through this message, let's learn.

First, in verses (1-8), Jesus deals with the Pharisees' hypocrisy. Jesus had a very wonderful ministry in Galilee. By imparting knowledge of God's word and meeting their material necessities, Jesus showed the merciful nature of God toward those in need. There were crowds following Jesus everywhere he went. In verse (1), Jesus was surrounded by a group of law experts and the haughty, self-righteous Pharisees from Jerusalem. Ignoring his divine compassion and power, they only tried to find a basis to accuse Jesus. They got out their magnifying glasses and looked very carefully. At last, they found something: the hungry disciples were eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed (2). How could the disciples dare to do this in that strict religious society? It was because they had tasted true freedom in Jesus. However, this became a big issue to the religious leaders. It was not a matter of hygiene, but it broke the tradition of the elders. Gentiles would find this hard to understand. So, Mark broke it down that the Pharisees and all the Jews kept various kinds of washing rituals based on the traditions of the elders (3-4). They did so to purify themselves from contamination after possible contact with unclean Gentiles and public sinners. It was their great effort to keep their identity as a holy people in a pagan culture. Anyone who broke the rule would be shamed, ostracized and treated as a criminal. So, the religious leaders thought they had an aha moment. They confidently accused Jesus, saying, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating food with defiled hands?” (5) Though they condemned the disciples, their real target was Jesus.

How did Jesus address them? Let's read verses 6-7. “He 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.”’” Jesus pointed out that the Pharisees were hypocrites. Hypocrite literally means “actor.” Good actors can follow a script, but it does not reflect who they really are. Their real person is different from the one they present to others.

First of all, they honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from God (6). In the synagogue they praised God with their lips, but when they got home, they complained and spoke ill of others. In the synagogue they spoke very godly words. But when they went home, they became totally different people, like the ungodly. It was because they lived before people, not before God. They were seeking men's praise and recognition instead of God's. They studied the Bible diligently, but did not apply it to themselves with repentance. Rarely do we ever see Jesus angry and sharply rebuking, however, the whole of Matthew 23, Jesus is rebuking the Pharisees and teachers of Law. Jesus says about them “Everything they do is done for men to see”. About seven times Jesus says to them “woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!” ...He calls them blind guides, blind fools. In Matthew 23:25, Jesus says “woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence” Lets read key verse again “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

Would God say something similar about us?

- They attend church, but their heart is far from Me.
- They read their Bible, but their heart is far from Me.
- They pray eloquently, but their heart is far from Me.
- They contribute money, but their heart is far from Me.
- They do bible studies and testimonies, but their heart is far from Me.
- They love to sing, but their heart is far from Me.
- They talk to others about Jesus, but their heart is far from Me.

Christian life cannot be lived only with one's lips, but must come from the heart. God really wants us to open our hearts to him and to love him and serve him with all our heart. Then God will be pleased, and our hearts can be full of the joy and satisfaction that comes from God.

Why does God want us to honor him from our hearts? The heart is the center of a human being. Proverbs 4:23 says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." In the time of Noah, when God saw that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time, the Lord grieved and regretted that he had made human beings (Gen 6:5). What matters to God is not outward appearance or achievement, but one's heart (1 Sa 16:7b). If one's heart is not right with God, even though he works hard at religious activities, he cannot please God. So, we need to examine our hearts seriously. "Are the thoughts of my heart inclined toward God or toward the world?" Sometimes our hearts are stolen by someone or something in the world. Each of us needs to ask ourselves, "Where is my heart?" Students can study well for the glory of God, do good for their fellow students, and share the gospel as opportunity arises. Employees can do excellent work and reveal Christ's presence in the workplace. Parents can raise their children well and manage their households in a way that honors God. Let's pray that we may honor God from our hearts in any situation.

In verses (7-13), Jesus exposes that their teachings were not from God, but based on human traditions. Verse 7 says, "They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules." God wants us to worship him based on the truth of his word. In fact, God is seeking those who worship in spirit and truth (Jn 4:23). But the religious leaders advocated human traditions more than God's word. Still, they tried to claim divine credibility, and this was hypocritical. Jesus said, "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions" (8). How had this happened? "After the Babylonian exile, the Jewish rabbis began to make meticulous rules and regulations governing the daily life of the people. These were interpretations and applications of the law of Moses, handed down from generation to generation. This had good basis and godly foundation, however, people started paying more attention to these expositions, and in this way, they let go of the commands of God and held on to human traditions.

In verses 9-13 Jesus gave an illustration. God's written law says, "Honor your father and mother." This is one of the Ten Commandments (10a; Ex 20:12). "Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death," explains the seriousness of honoring one's parents (10b; Ex 21:17). The words of God cannot be set aside. But the religious leaders had a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe their own traditions (9). Jesus explained how they did so through the practice of Corban. "Corban" is actually a good word. It means "sacrificial offering to God." However, the religious leaders misused Corban. They claimed to dedicate their property to God, but in truth they kept it for their own use and avoided helping their parents. Under the façade of religious zeal, they were negligent of basic human responsibility commanded by God. Jesus said that they did many things like that. In this way they created an atmosphere in which no one could do anything for their father or mother (12). Thus, they nullified the words of God by their tradition (13). Here we learn that God's word has more authority than human traditions. Jesus summarized God's commandments by saying: Love God and love your neighbor (Mar 12:29-31). We must love God first, but at the same time we must love our neighbors, including our parents and family members. In fact, loving God is expressed by loving others. Where there is the love of God, there will be love between people as well. We should be on guard against rules and regulations that violate the law of love.

The commands of God are just as valid in our time as they were when Moses gave them. In fact, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made them even more applicable. At the same time, Jesus brought the grace and truth of the gospel. This must be supreme in our faith. This gospel tells us several major truths which we must hold with an absolute attitude, such as: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23a). "Man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment" (Heb 9:27). "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death" (Rev 21:8). "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Joh 3:16). These truths are summarized in the Apostle's Creed that we declare every Sunday. We must hold on to them with an absolute attitude. As Paul said, "By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you; otherwise, you have believed in vain." We should not only honor God with our lips, but with our heart too!

Generally speaking, I adapt very well to culture or routine or tradition. I always think I would have made a good soldier! Just take orders, not much thought applied and execute. I have shared this a couple of times, growing up in my home, I put a façade in order to fit in to our Christian community. This character trait has died and resurfaced many times in my life. Even when I first came to UBF and learned about bible studies and testimony writing, it was all good and exciting at the beginning, then it became tradition for me...I no longer put my heart, I just prepare study questions so we can have that session. Many times, I have written a testimony with the reader/listener's perspective, meaning, as I wrote, I thought carefully about how it would sound without truly reflecting. As the leader of the music team, I have many times found myself just preparing what I have to without sincere consideration of presenting before God. When Jesus says "you hypocrites..." it hits close to home, because I have offered to God lip service at some point.

At the beginning of the year, we had a very special event with the "worship team". Moved by the word of God in Isaiah, we engaged in prayer and repented. Isaiah 1:11-17, "What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?" says the Lord. "I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle. I get no pleasure from the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. 12 When you come to worship me, who asked you to parade through my courts with all your ceremony? 13 Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me! As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting— they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings. 14 I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals. They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them! 15 When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims. 16 Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. 17 Learn to do good. Seek justice. Through deep inspection, it dawned to us that most times as we stand in front to sing, all we do is offer lip service and God calls such "meaningless sacrifices". Through obedience and repentance, our hearts were cleansed.

In today's passage I am rebuked to not only honor God with my lips, but with my heart. We may seek to be clean by bathing daily and perhaps putting makeup and tailed by redolence from cologne...or by religiously doing bible studies and testimonies only as tradition...but the real mop to clean our defiled hearts is obedience to the word of God.

One word: Honor God with your heart.