

HONOR GOD FROM OUR HEARTS

Mark 7:1-23

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. Right after this, Jesus left Galilee, passed through various Gentile regions, including Tyre, Sidon, the Decapolis, and Caesarea Philippi (7:24,31; 8:27), and then went on to Jerusalem where he would die on the cross. So Jesus' Galilean ministry comes to an end in 7:23, and a Gentile ministry is hinted at. It is fitting that at this moment Jesus deals with the issue of ceremonial cleanness 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. Only a change in the human heart can bring about true cleanness and make a person right with God. Jesus' teaching made it crystal clear that Christian faith would not be a matter of rituals and ceremonies, but of transformed hearts. Later, when he sent his disciples into the whole world to preach the gospel it was not to bring about outward conformity to Jewish ceremonial law, but inner transformation. Jesus came to enable all kinds of people to honor and worship God from our hearts. When we hear the words “honor God from your heart,” they may scare us. We cannot deny that sinful desires, thoughts and words in our hearts hinder us every day. How can we honor God from our hearts? Let's learn through this message.

First, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees' hypocrisy (1-13). Jesus' Galilean ministry was truly beautiful. Jesus revealed God's compassionate heart toward helpless people by teaching the words of God and caring for their practical needs. Wherever Jesus went, so many people came to him. Yet, where there was a great work of God, Satan was not far away, like a cockroach hiding in the wall. The proud, self-righteous Pharisees and some teachers of the law who came from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus (1). 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

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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 explained parenthetically 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 caught Jesus. They confidently accused him, 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 counter 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.”’”** They had never imagined that Isaiah’s prophecy applied to them. They might have wondered, “Where are those verses in Isaiah?” 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. The religious leaders washed their hands diligently, but inwardly they were full of greed and self-indulgence (Mt 23:25). They appeared to people as righteous, but on the inside they were full of wickedness (Mt 23:28). Their hypocrisy was revealed in two ways.

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. Sometimes we can serve God like a

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computer that turns on and off automatically without giving our hearts. We may go through the program faithfully, but have no real joy and become weary and complain a lot in our hearts. 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?” Many people have heard of James Foley, who was one of the American journalists beheaded by Muslim extremists recently. James was a faithful Catholic Christian, and a graduate of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. While being held as a prisoner, he did his best to care for fellow captives. It is said that he volunteered to die first, so that others might be spared. After his death, his mother said in a public interview, “We are so proud of our son. He gave his life for others and he died without fear.” Later Pope Francis called her and acknowledged James as a martyr. I believe that James Foley honored God from his heart. We are not all called to serve as he did. But we can honor God from our hearts in our own situations. 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.

Secondly, their teachings were not from God, but based on human traditions (7-13). Verse 7 says, **“They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.”** God wants us to worship him based on the truth

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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. In Jesus' day this 'tradition of the elders' was in oral form. It was not until c. AD 200 that it was put into writing in the Mishnah."¹ The Mishnah was a commentary on the written law. In the course of time, the commentary was valued more than the written words of God. Some religious leaders said that the written law was like water and the oral law was like wine. 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). God's written words, "**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." It could refer to an animal sacrifice or a grain offering or to oneself, in the case of a Nazirite. It is interesting that there is a Corban University in Salem, Oregon, dedicated to the raising of Christian leaders. Such dedication is admirable. 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 we must respect the word of God more than human traditions. Jesus summarized God's commandments by saying: Love God and love your neighbor (Mk 12:29-31). We must love God first, but at the same

¹ NIV Study Bible Notes on Matthew 15:2.

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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. In his book, “The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ,” Ray Ortlund wrote: “We accept that the truth of biblical doctrine is essential to authentic Christianity, but do we accept that the beauty of human relationships is equally essential? If by God’s grace we hold the two together—gospel doctrine and gospel culture—people of all ages will more likely come to our churches with great joy. It is more likely that they will think, ‘Here is the answer I have been looking for all my life’” (p 22). The words of God, especially the commands to love, must be respected in our community. Then the beauty of the gospel can be displayed as we love God and love one another, and our neighbors, from our hearts.

Second, what really defiles a person (14-23). After directly addressing the Pharisees, Jesus then called the crowd to him. The crowd had been harassed and enslaved by the demands of the religious leaders. Consciously and unconsciously their lives had been governed by empty rituals and rules. Jesus wanted to set them free. Jesus said, **“Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them”** (14-15). After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. Jesus’ teaching was very clear. The disciples’ lack of understanding was inexcusable. So Jesus rebuked them, **“Are you so dull? Don’t you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn’t go into their heart but into the stomach, and then out of the body”** (17-19a). Mark comments that in saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean (19b). Jesus terminated the Old Testament ceremonial laws about clean and unclean food. Found in the book of Leviticus, these extensive rules were given to discipline the Israelites, who had been slaves in Egypt. They had no concept of holiness at all under the influence of an idol worshiping culture. The Egyptian and Canaanite gods were immoral, vile and wicked, like human beings. They were adulterous, murderous and deceptive. But God is holy. So God’s people must be holy. They could not follow the corrupt culture they lived in, but needed to create a new culture, a godly culture. That is why God said, **“Be holy, because I am holy”** (Lev 11:44-45). The rules of clean and unclean food had helped them to do this. But holiness

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could not really be attained through dietary practices. So now Jesus, as the Son of God, declared that all foods were clean. God's children are free to eat any kind of food, as long as we can digest it well. 1 Timothy 4:4 says, **“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”** So we can enjoy ham and bacon and squid and octopus without any problem of conscience.

Jesus' main point, however, was not to declare all foods clean. He wanted to teach what really defiles a person. So Jesus went on: **“What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person”** (20-23). As we have studied, God wants us to honor and worship him from our hearts. The problem is that our hearts are fully defiled by evil thoughts. Where do evil thoughts come from? Where do sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice and so on come from? They come from our hearts. Jeremiah said, **“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”** (Jer 17:9) How can we honor God with evil hearts? It is impossible. So hard work and good deeds done from an evil heart are like filthy rags before God. Yet Jesus did not teach us this to make us fatalistic and despair and become more evil. Rather, he wanted us to realize that we cannot honor God and worship him from our hearts without his help. Our hearts should be purified. In the Old Testament God opened the way for people to come to him by sacrificing animals. The blood of animals, sprinkled on those who were ceremonially unclean sanctified them so that they were outwardly clean. The blood of animals, however, could not cleanse their hearts. This system was a shadow of that which was to come. That is why Jesus would soon be on his way to Jerusalem, where he would die on the cross for our sins.

Jesus, the Son of God, became the Lamb of God whose blood can cleanse the hearts of people. Hebrews 9:14 says, **“How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”** Only the blood of Christ can purify our sin-stained hearts. It is because the blood of Christ was not tainted by sin. The blood of Christ was the blood of the Son of God, which is valuable

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beyond our understanding. This blood has tremendous power. When we come to God, we need to claim the blood of Christ. When God sees the blood of Christ, he accepts us as his holy children. The blood of Christ is essential for us to have fellowship with God. How can we claim the blood of Christ? 1 John 1:7-9 says, **“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”** When we come to Jesus as we are, acknowledging our sins, and simply trust him, he will forgive us and purify us from all sin. As we trust in his blood moment by moment, he will enable us to love God and love others from our hearts. The blood of Jesus is the key to genuine heart transformation and to establish a genuine love community. The people of our time are tired of empty promises and utopian dreams. But when they see the love of God in genuine community, they will be drawn to Christ. They will want to share what we have in Christ.

Today we learn that a new and living way has been opened for us to come to God. It is through the blood of Jesus. In order to come to God, we need to trust and depend on Christ absolutely. Let's come to Jesus as we are and trust in him to cleanse our hearts and make us right with God. Let's honor God from our hearts in our personal lives, in our homes, in our campuses, and in our community by faith in Jesus.