

Honor God With Your Heart

Mark 7:1-23

Key Verse: 7:6

“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.”’”

In this passage, Jesus confronts the Pharisees. Though they came to destroy Jesus, Jesus turned their visit into an opportunity to teach some important lessons. One is to discern between the word of God and tradition. Most of all, we must examine our hearts as we serve God. God wants us to honor and love him from our hearts. Let’s learn how.

I. Jesus exposes hypocrisy (1-8).

Jesus had been healing all kinds of people. Jesus’ love and power were flowing freely to anyone who had faith. So Jesus and his disciples were very busy serving many people. As they took a short break for lunch, some Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem gathered around them. These legalistic and educated men evoked intimidation in the hearts of ordinary people. Sincere Bible students stepped aside to let them surround Jesus. The Pharisees were looking for something to criticize. Quickly they realized that Jesus’ disciples were eating with “unclean” hands. Here “unclean” does not concern poor hygiene. It refers to ceremonial uncleanness. The Pharisees’ habit was to wash their hands before eating as a religious ceremony. They believed that this purified them from defiling elements of the marketplace, and it made them clean before God. They washed cups, pitchers and kettles to keep them ceremonially clean (3,4). Feeling very self-righteous, they asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

In actuality, these men came to discredit and destroy Jesus. In chapter 3, when Jesus had healed a man with a shriveled hand on the Sabbath, he exposed their utter selfishness. Jesus also revealed his own genuine love and life-giving spirit to save men. How nice it would have been if the Pharisees had learned Jesus’ compassionate heart. Instead, they decided to kill Jesus (3:6). Later they called him demon possessed (3:22). Nevertheless, ordinary people recognized Jesus as their good shepherd and flocked to him. The synagogues were losing members week by week. Some of the Pharisees were preaching to empty chairs. If people were allowed, they would abandon the Pharisees, and all go to Jesus. So the Pharisees wanted to get rid of Jesus.

How did Jesus respond? Jesus could have called down leprosy on each of them or frozen the muscles in their mouths. Instead he taught them the truth that could save them. Look at verse 6. “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.”’” Jesus said plainly that the Pharisees were hypocrites. The main problem of a hypocrite is that his heart

is far from God. The first commandment in the Law of Moses was to love God with all their hearts. The Pharisees knew this very well, but they did not practice it. Instead, they gave their hearts to worldly things. They loved their own honor and tried to impress people. They loved money. They were adulterous. Still, before people they said all the right things. They fascinated many, but they made God very sorry. When they gathered for worship they sang well and performed ritual ceremonies with precision and skill. However, their worship was in vain (7). Worship is the time to honor and love God from our hearts. To do this, we must accept the word of God with repentance and faith. But the Pharisees had no word of God in their hearts. They clung to human traditions. They did not meet God for worship.

Jesus said in verse 8, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.” Here the commands of God are absolute truths of God that are eternal and unchanging, such as the Ten Commandments. The traditions of men are of human origin. They may be beneficial for a specific generation or a culture, but they lack the universality of God. They are not authoritative or binding. We must discern between the commands of God and the traditions of men.

At first, the Pharisees studied the Bible well. They formed their traditions based on the word of God. This made them strong. They survived Hellenism by holding to their traditions. As time went by, however, they failed to go back and study the Bible newly to evaluate their traditions in light of God’s absolute word. We learn from this that we must not elevate traditions too highly. We must honor God’s word highly. Traditions need to be evaluated in light of the commands of God.

Past and present, many churches used stained glass windows to relate Bible stories to illiterate people. Yet as time went by, the beauty of the window became most important. Then some people were so distracted by them that they did not listen to the sermon. When we took over this building, Dr. Samuel Lee directed us to take out all the stained glass windows. Many young men joyfully smashed and removed all such windows in one day. Then some neighbors came and shed tears. They had not entered the church for years. They should have come to repent of their sins. But they came to grieve over the stained glass windows.

We must honor the word of God more than our traditions. In UBF testimony sharing meetings are a kind of tradition. Missionary Samuel G. Lee of Ottawa wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on the spiritual value of testimony sharing. It is meant to encourage repentance, faith in the word of God, and mutual edification. However, if these meetings are not focused on the word of God, they quickly degenerate into mere human fellowship and become traditional and habitual. We learned many good lessons from Dr. Samuel Lee which we call his spiritual legacy. The last thing he said was “Go back to the Bible.” We must constantly evaluate our lives and ministries before the word of God. We must not do things habitually and without consideration. We must always ask “Why?” And we must be able to answer based on the living word of God.

II. Jesus teaches the right attitude toward the word of God (9-13).

The Pharisees were not humble and pure like other people who came to Jesus. The Pharisees were like wolves in shepherd's garments. Jesus rebuked them sharply. Look at verse 9. "And he said to them: 'You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!'" Then Jesus gave them an example. Look at verse 10. "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'" This is the fifth of the Ten Commandments. Jesus did not stop by quoting, "Honor your father and mother," but Jesus also quoted, "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death." In doing so, Jesus teaches us that the commands of God are the commands of God; they are absolute, a matter of life and death. There is absolute blessing for obedience and there is definitely curse for disobedience. Obedience leads to life; disobedience leads to death. There is no middle ground.

Now let's consider the command itself. It says, "Honor your father and mother." God commands children to honor their parents. To be right with God, children must honor their parents. We saw the good example of Mother Barry. When her father went to heaven, she took care of her mother in her home with great affection, though she was very busy in the work of God. God gave this command to keep order on the earth. When we keep this command we please God and enjoy long life in the world God made. But those who dishonor their parents grieve God and will be punished by God. This simple truth should have been absolute to the Pharisees. However, the Pharisees found a way to circumvent this command. Basically they pledged their estate to God, effective at the time of their death. Still, they could enjoy it during their lifetimes. But formally, they devoted everything to God. When their parents asked for help, they said, "Mom, Dad: I have devoted my estate to God. I cannot help you. It would be a sin for me to help you. Sorry." Younger ones would say, "Sorry, mom and dad, I can't clean my room, I have a meeting at church." Jesus clearly said that such practice nullified the word of God for the sake of tradition. This was just one of many examples.

Jesus says, "then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother." The influence of the Pharisees spread far and wide. Their elevation of human tradition above the word of God damaged the people and the nation terribly. When the word of God is not honored, chaos ensues. Here we learn that the responsibility of a Bible teacher is great. We must study the word of God with an awesome respect and teach the word of God with prayer that God himself may speak through it.

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" (Ro 3:23). "The wages of sin is death" (Ro

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” (Jn 3:16). “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (Jn 5:24). “At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with power and great glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens” (Mk 13:26-27). These truths are summarized in the Apostle’s Creed. 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 live in times marked by relativism. It is good to be relativistic about music styles or clothing styles. But we must never be relativistic about the gospel. We must hold on to the gospel absolutely. According to Paul, even if an angel tells us a truth contrary to the gospel, we should not believe it; that angel will be eternally condemned (Gal 1:8).

III. We need a clean heart (14-23).

Jesus’ absolute attitude toward the word of God and his clear insight into the hypocrisy of the religious leaders disarmed them completely. They could not say anything to Jesus, and seemed to just slink away from the scene. Then Jesus gathered all the sincere people around him once again and told them, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’” Then Jesus left the crowd and entered a house. His disciples asked him about the parable. Jesus first rebuked them, “Are you so dull?” Then he taught them two very important truths.

First, Jesus declared all foods clean. Jesus asked, “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” Mark adds the parenthetical comment, “(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods ‘clean.’)” Jesus is nullifying dietary and ceremonial laws in order to promote true holiness and brotherly love. It was not easy for Peter to accept this teaching. Jesus had to show him a vision three times in Acts 10 to get Peter to eat all kinds of foods. This was basic training for missionary life. It was training to accept all kinds of people without getting hung up on cultural differences. We should not criticize people for what they eat, how they eat, or how they wash their hands. We must learn to embrace many different kinds of people who have different cultural habits with the love of God.

Second, we need clean hearts. The real problem of all people is a heart problem. Look at verses 20-23. “He went on: ‘What comes out of a man is what makes him “unclean.” For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All

these evils come from inside and make a man “unclean.””” When a man’s heart is evil, he is evil. No matter how ceremonial he is or how careful about his diet, he is evil. He will grieve God and damage others in many ways. These days many people are quite concerned about their outward appearance. Many want to lose ten pounds and grieve because of this. But the real problem of each person is in his heart. We must be most concerned about our hearts. That is where wicked thoughts, words, and deeds originate.

However, in dealing with our hearts we need great wisdom. First of all, we must know that our hearts are deceitful. In the time of Noah, men thought they were pretty good. They were very strong and smart. They praised one another in many ways. But God looked into their hearts and said they are only evil all the time. Again, Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” We cannot trust our own understanding. We must examine our hearts in light of the word of God. There is a young married woman. Her husband is kind and loving to her. But she has an evil thought of jealousy in her heart. This drives her crazy from time to time. Even though she is like this, she does not think she has a problem. She thinks her husband has the problem. The heart is deceitful. It always points the blame at others. We must acknowledge that we are evil because the Bible says we are evil. We must accept this by faith and believe it in order to discover the wretchedness of our hearts.

When we see our hearts as they truly are, we shudder at the evilness there. Then we face another problem. We have no way to cleanse our hearts. The wickedness is ingrained that we can do nothing. So St. Paul confessed, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Ro 7:18). He found that he could do nothing to help himself. Though he was one of the most disciplined men in the world, he could not solve his heart problem. All he could do was cry out to Jesus to rescue him from his body of death. So it is with us.

King David was known as a man after God’s own heart. God called him and anointed him as a shepherd for his people, a godly king, the shadow of the Messiah. But one day in the warm spring, David became lazy and did not join his men as they went out to fight the war. His idle heart was captured by a beautiful woman and, to make a long story short, David committed adultery and then murder. His heart was overwhelmed with wickedness and evil. He did not confess his sin willingly. Rather, he tried to hide his sin. But he was rebuked by the prophet Nathan. When he was rebuked he repented and began to cry out to God. He said, “Have mercy on me, O God...Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Ps 51:1,10). Then God forgave his sin and restored David’s heart. Then David could enjoy the blessedness of being right with God once again (Ps 32:1).

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 honestly with our sin problem, he forgives and cleanses us. Jesus also

restores us to true fellowship with his people. Jesus solves all of our “trust issues.” Sometimes we don’t trust others, knowing that everyone’s heart is evil. But when we are right with Jesus we can truly love and trust one another from our hearts. Still, we must guard our hearts. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Above all else guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” When our hearts are pure, and God dwells in our hearts, we can be holy and happy. We can live as God’s children and be a blessing to others. This simple truth is the foundation of happiness for each person. Moreover, when one person’s heart changes in God, it is the beginning of changing a campus, a nation and the whole world. There is a beautiful young girl. As the daughter of missionaries, she did her best to please her parents and to be a good example to others. But one day she found her heart drawn to a boy with romantic feelings. When these feelings ruled her heart she felt cursed and miserable. Then she began to cry out to Jesus. Jesus gave her victory over the evil in her heart. She was set free to love God and to worship God. Now she wants to give her heart to God and live as a woman of God. She wants to be a blessing to other young women around her. Jesus can change our hearts. Jesus can make us new. But we must come to him as we are, crying out for his help.

Now we are trying hard to prepare summer Bible conferences. We must cry out to God to cleanse our hearts by the blood of Jesus. Then we can serve God joyfully and be a blessing. May God help each of us to have a clean heart by faith in Jesus’ blood. May God bless us to hold the gospel as the absolute truth of God and to share it with the people of our time.