

WORSHIP GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART

Mark 7:1-23

Key Verse 7:6b-7

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.

Last Thursday around 20 people gathered at the church sanctuary and had an in-person praise and worship night with masks on. I could join this amazing event organized by Little Sarah and was so blessed by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We sang songs wholeheartedly and prayed sincerely with repentance for around 2 hours. I was so happy for worshiping our glorious God. How much I had desired to have such an in-person praise and worship night! The pandemic situation had limited a lot our in-person gatherings where we could meet our God in spirit and truth together with our beloved brothers and sisters. However, the coronavirus cannot hinder us from worshiping God with all our hearts. I pray that God renews our hearts through this message so that we can worship God with all our hearts.

Today's passage teaches us how we have to worship God. It starts with the Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem and gathered around Jesus (1). It seems that they were sent by Jewish religious leaders to investigate the ministry of Jesus and find any basis of accusation against him. After careful observations they saw that some of the disciples of Jesus ate with unwashed hands, which was a violation of the tradition of the elders (2). The author Mark puts a parenthetical comment on the Jewish tradition of washing hands saying, "The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders" (3). Their hand washing was a ritual ceremony intended to honor the holiness of God, rather than a matter of hygiene. These days we are required to wash our hands thoroughly with soap or hand sanitizer due to the coronavirus. I carry my personal hand sanitizer when I come to our in-person worship service and wash my hands frequently with it. Sometimes I feel very uncomfortable and worried when I do not wash my hands properly. It is not because I am trying to cleanse myself before God, but because I am trying to be free from the virus. However, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in this passage practiced the ceremonial hand washing for their holiness before God. The Jewish society accepted and practiced it as their ritual ceremony. When they came from the marketplace, they did not eat unless they washed their whole bodies; furthermore, they had to wash cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches because there were so many dangers of coming into contact with sinners and Gentiles (4).

Therefore, they could not accept that the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands before eating. They criticized Jesus saying, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?” (5) The Pharisees and the teachers of the law criticized Jesus that his disciples were violating the tradition of the elders. Their target was not the disciples, but Jesus whom they considered dangerous. The tradition of the elders refers to the rabbinic rules and regulations that were interpretations and applications of the Mosaic Law. This tradition had been transmitted in oral form until it was codified into the Mishnah toward the end of the second century A.D. The tradition of the elders was considered as an obligation like the law of Moses. According to the teachers of the law and their followers, it showed the real meaning of the law that had to be applied to their daily lives. However, in many cases the tradition of the elders demanded more than what was required by the law of God. For example, the law of God demanded that people of Israel had to wash their clothes when the Lord came down from Mount Sinai (Ex 19:10) and the priests had to bathe themselves before conducting service to God (Lev 16:28; Nu 19:7). Also, the law demanded that they had to wash hands under some specific conditions (Lev 15:11). However, the Mosaic Law did not demand hand washing before eating. Hence, this tradition of the elders regarding washing hands did not have any ground in the Law of Moses.

How did Jesus respond to the accusation of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law? Please look at vv. 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 their problem was hypocrisy calling them “you hypocrites” and quoted a prophecy of Isaiah. The word ‘hypocrite’ in classical Greek means an ‘actor.’ It referred to the discrepancy in the behavior of one who unconsciously has alienated oneself from God. Jesus called the Pharisees and the teachers of the law hypocrites because of the conflict between their external actions and internal attitudes. They honored God with their lips, that is to say, with their external actions. However, their hearts, in other words their internal attitudes, were far from God. There was a big discrepancy between their behaviors and their hearts in serving and worshiping God. Why did they become hypocrites? It was because they did not live before God, but lived before people. They wanted to be recognized and praised by people through showing their religious actions, such as praying standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others (Mt 8:5). They studied diligently the law of Moses and the traditions of the elders to boast of their human knowledge. However, they never accepted the teaching of God with their hearts, nor applied it to their lives with repentance. They looked like pious on the outside, but on the inside they were decayed because of their hidden sins. They had a form of godliness but denied its power (2Ti 3:5).

Around 2 months ago, we were very shocked by the hypocrisy of one world-famous Christian evangelist and apologist. It was revealed that he had hidden hundreds of

pictures of women, sexual abuses, and immorality both in the United States and abroad over more than a decade, misusing his religious influence and the fund of his evangelistic organization. When he was 17 years old, he tried to commit suicide by swallowing poison. While he was in the hospital, he was touched by the word of God and made a decision to commit his life to Christ. I believe that he was a faithful Christian until he lost his heart before God living before people. We cannot blame him for his hypocrisy because we are vulnerable too as he was. If we do not live before God who is watching over us always but live before people, we will fall into the trap of hypocrisy and become like the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

Therefore, the first thing that we must do is to guard our heart in the sight of God. Our heart is the center of our physical, mental, and spiritual life. The heart as a physical organ is considered to be the center of our body. If our hearts stop working, our bodies are dead. Our heart is closely connected to our thought (Lk 2:19), our will (2 Cor 9:7), and our feeling. As Psalm 4:7 says: "Fill my heart with joy ...," our emotions such as joy, fear, sorrow, love, hate, etc. originate from our heart. Furthermore, our heart is considered to be our true nature in contrast to our outward appearance. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "... People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Therefore, Proverbs 4:23 warns us saying, "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it." We can work hard for the mission of God. However, if we do not guard our heart before God, we will be hypocrites. If our hearts are far from God, we will not be able to worship God in spirit and truth.

Now we are worshiping God through this Sunday gathering, some in person at the church and the others online at their own places. Really it is a great blessing for us to worship God through this gathering because we can meet God, repent of our sins, be forgiven by the grace of Jesus Christ, and be restored with the power of the Holy Spirit in this moment. However, if my heart is not with God even though I am preaching this message now, my worship would be meaningless and useless. Hence, I have to examine myself in this moment asking, "Where is my heart now?" "Is it with God or far from God?" If my heart is far from God now, I have to return my heart to God seeking the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. And then, I will be blessed by the grace of my Lord Jesus and filled with joy and peace. But to worship God is much more than a Sunday gathering. To worship God is the main purpose of our lives. All of us were born to worship God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we must worship God with our entire lives as apostle Paul teaches us saying, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Rom 12:1). Our true and proper worship is to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which refers to our total obedience to the word of God in faith and action. We must worship God with all our hearts throughout our entire lives, which means that the purpose and motive of our lives must be for the glory of God, seeking how to please God in every decision of our lives. To worship God with all

our hearts means to be filled with holy desires from God and practice the love of Jesus Christ to our friends, neighbor, and all people of the world.

The hypocrisy of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law originated from letting go of the commands of God and holding on to human traditions (8). However, they could not realize it because they thought they were keeping well the commands of God, though they were not. How could it happen? It happened because they had forgotten the spirit of God's commands, holding on to human traditions. What is the spirit of the commands of God? It is LOVE! One time someone asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment in the Law. Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these" (Mk 12:30-31). The religious leaders failed in obeying the commands of God because they did not love God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength. They failed in keeping the commands of God because they did not love their neighbor as themselves. Consequently, they became hypocrites. Therefore, we must remember that to worship God with our hearts is to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Jesus gave an example of Corban to let them know that they had set aside the commands of God in order to observe their own traditions. Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' These were commands of God in the Bible (Ex 20:12; 21:17). However, they had a tradition of "Corban" which meant "devoting an offering or gift to the temple." If a person merely pronounced the word "Corban" over any possession or property, it was irrevocably dedicated to the temple and forbidden for any other use. Some persons misused this tradition to avoid giving needed care to their parents. For example, a man told his father, "Dear father, I would willingly give it to you, but it is Corban. I count it better to give it to God than to you, and it will help you better." Jesus pointed out that in this way they had set aside the commands of God and were holding on to human traditions.

The misuse of Corban tradition came from the wickedness of human hearts. Surely, to dedicate our lives and possessions to God is a beautiful deed by which God will be pleased. We can find many such beautiful stories in the Bible. Samuel was dedicated to God by his mother Hannah and he was used greatly for God's redemptive work. In the New Testament, Barnabas sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet (Acts 4:36-37). He was called by the apostles "son of encouragement" because he encouraged the faith community with his life of love and sacrifice. Our faith community also has many beautiful stories of the men and women of faith who dedicated their lives and possessions to God's work. I believe that God knows the intention of our hearts and will bless our faith. When I had to leave my home country to go to Venezuela as a missionary, I worried about my mother and father who were not believers yet and

had a big expectation for me. My mother cried a lot because of my absence from her. However, God blessed my life of faith and mission letting my mother and father believe in Jesus through me. When my mother visited Venezuela, she accepted Jesus as her Savior and became a faithful Christian. Later, she led my father to accept Jesus. They have been supporting my family with prayer, and I support them financially. To be dedicated to God does not mean to neglect our duties to our parents and children. We must be good sons and daughters as well as good parents. At the same time, we must dedicate our lives to God as faithful servants of God.

After the debate with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them” (15). But his disciples could not understand this parable and asked Jesus about it. Jesus rebuked them, calling them “dull,” because of their lack of understanding. And then, he taught them that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them because it doesn’t go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body. Mark put another parenthetical comment that in saying this Jesus declared all foods clean. Some foods are healthy, while others are unhealthy. We need to eat healthy food. However, all foods are clean, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving because everything God created is good (1Tim 4:4). What really defiles us is what comes out of a person! (20) Jesus told 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” (21, 22).

Our heart, which is the center of our physical, mental, and spiritual life, became depraved from the time Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s commandment. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Therefore, it is very important to realize that all evil thoughts come out of our depraved heart. If we have evil thoughts—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance or folly, we must understand that all these evil things come from our depraved heart. Therefore, without the restoration of our hearts there is no freedom from our sins. Because the heart is at the root of the problem, our heart is the place where God does his renewal work in each of us. Ezekiel 18:31-32 say, “Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!” God wants us to repent of our sins and get new hearts and new spirits. He declares: “Repent and live!” When we repent of our sins, God will give us new hearts and we will live forever. When we repent of our sins, the power of the blood of Jesus will cleanse our hearts to be renewed. 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!” Jesus, the Son of God, died on the cross shedding his

blood to save us and give us freedom from all our sins. Therefore, we must come to the cross of Jesus every day and be renewed in our hearts through the blood of Jesus. "What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. O precious is the flow that makes me white as snow. No other fount I know. Nothing but the blood of Jesus" (Hymn 453).

When our hearts are renewed through the blood of Jesus, we can worship God with all our hearts. How great is the blessing of worshiping our glorious God! We will be filled with heavenly joy and peace when we worship God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. May God bless each of us to be renewed with the power of the blood of Jesus Christ and worship God with all our heart. Amen.