**HONOR GOD WITH YOUR HEART**

***Mark 7:1-23***

***“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.”’” (v. 6)***

“Daily renewal and daily renewal again!” In the ancient Chinese Dynasty, a king named Tang, inscribed some letters on his basin and read them when he washed his hands every morning. The letters reminded him of his desire to be renewed every day. As the king longed to be a new person daily, we want to be transformed day by day. How is this possible? To be changed, we may focus on our outward appearance, actions, or achievements. In today’s passage, however, Jesus teaches that we must renew our hearts first. The heart is unseen, so we may easily neglect to take care of it. But Jesus emphasizes the importance of caring for our hearts. God knows and sees each of our hearts. He wants us to honor him with all our hearts and worship him with clean hearts. May God open our hearts and help us to deeply accept Jesus teaching from our hearts!

1. **Honor God with your heart, not just lips (vs. 1-13)**

Jesus’ Galilean ministry so far was truly beautiful. He revealed God’s compassionate shepherd heart toward helpless people by teaching the words of God and caring for their practical needs. Wherever he went, so many people came to him. Yet, where there is a great work of God, Satan is always working. Look at verse 1. ***“The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.”*** Ignoring Jesus’ divine compassion and power, the religious leaders only tried to find any basis to accuse Jesus. So they got out their magnifying glasses and critically observed his every move. At last, they found something: his hungry disciples were eating food with unwashed hands. Why was eating food with unwashed hands such a critical issue to the Jews? It was not a matter of hygiene. Gentiles would find this hard to understand. So Mark explained parenthetically in verses 3-4 that the Pharisees and all the Jews kept various kinds of washing rituals based on the traditions of the elders. They did so to purify themselves from contamination after possible contact with unclean Gentiles, public sinners, or defiled objects. Anyone who broke this rule would be considered as unholy 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 their food with defiled hands?” (5)***

How did Jesus counter 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.”’”*** By quoting Isaiah 29:13, Jesus, our spiritual doctor, diagnosed their fundamental problem. It was a heart problem. Their hearts were far from God. The religious leaders washed their hands diligently and appeared to people as righteous and holy, but inwardly they were full of greed, self-indulgence, and wickedness (Mt 23:25-28). Their hearts were not right with God. Because of this great gap between their outward religious life and inward heart condition, Jesus called them hypocrites. Hypocrite literally means “actor.” Good actors can follow a script, but it does not reflect who they really are. 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 were alone, they became totally different people, like the ungodly. Deep down, they did not honor God with their hearts.

Why does God want us to honor him with our hearts? The heart is the control center of a human being. Everything we do flows from our hearts (Pr 4:23). Our heart affects all areas of our lives: emotions, will, words, and actions. People look at the outward appearance or achievements, so we have a tendency to seek men’s praise and recognition and live before people. But God looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7). God is concerned about our deepest motivations. God weighs and judges our motives, thoughts, and desires. If one’s heart is not devoted to God, even though he works hard at various religious activities, he cannot please God. So we need to examine our hearts seriously. Each of us needs to ask ourselves, “Where is my heart?” God really wants us 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 come from God.

Jesus teaches that there is very clear evidence by which we can recognize whether our hearts are right with God or not. How? It is whether we hold on to the word of God or human traditions as of first priority. Look at verses 7-8, ***“‘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.”*** The Jewish rabbis asserted that Moses gave both the “written law” and an “oral law” on Mount Sinai, and that the oral law was passed down to the nation through their elders. So they called the oral law “the tradition of the elders.” They regarded the oral law as essential to interpret the written law and to carry out God’s commandments in the law. But later they valued their traditions more than the written words of God. They considered the written law to be like water and the oral law like fine wine. In this way, they let go of the commands of God and held on to human traditions. However, Jesus clearly declares the human origin of the oral tradition and straightforwardly rejects its authority.

Furthermore, in verses 9-13, Jesus showed an example of how they let go of the word of God through the practice of Corban, one of their traditions. “Corban” means “an offering devoted to God.” It is actually a good word. It’s 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 or money to God, but in truth they kept it for their own use and avoided helping their parents. In doing so, by their tradition, they nullified God’s commandments, ***“Honor your father and mother,***” and ***“Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.”***

Likewise, we must also carefully examine if what we are saying, doing, or insisting on is based on the word of God or just human ideas or rules. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus summarizes the entirety of God’s law in just two commandments. The first is *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* And the second is *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* We need to check whether our motives, words, or actions are obeying or contradicting the word of God: Love God and love your neighbor. Sometimes, out of our own human zeal for traditions, we may neglect God’s words and his heart. Apostle Paul, before meeting the Risen Christ, was extremely zealous for the traditions of the elders (Ga 1:14), but as a result, he was nothing but a murderer and persecutor of God’s church. His zeal was based on his perverse heart, deeply rooted in pride, self-righteousness and hatred. We need to remember that when our hearts are not right with God’s heart and his words, we may become enemies of God and hinder God’s will regardless of our great zeal. May God help us to honor him with all our hearts!

1. **Honor God with a clean heart, not an evil heart (vs. 14-23)**

After directly addressing the Pharisees, Jesus then called the crowd to him and 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).*** But the disciples could not understand this parable. So after Jesus had left the crowd and entered the house, they asked him about its meaning. Jesus’ teaching was very clear, so he said, ***“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 their stomach, and then out of the body” (17-19a).*** Jesus teaches what really defiles a person comes neither from food nor unwashed hands. Mark comments that in saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean (19b). God’s children are free to eat any kind of food, as long as we can digest it well. 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. Look at verses 20-23. ***“He 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.’”*** What comes out of a person represents evil thoughts inside one’s heart, and these actually make a person unclean. Jesus says in Luke 6:43, *“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.”* We cannot expect good fruit in our lives from impure hearts. Hard work and seemingly good deeds from an evil heart are like filthy rags before God. So what is Jesus’ main point in these verses? Jesus emphasizes that each of us must honor God with a clean heart. A pure heart is essential to have a right relationship with God because God is holy (Lev 19:2). How then can we renew and purify our hearts so that they remain acceptable to God?

First, by the blood of Jesus Christ. In Noah’s time, God was grieved by all mankind because every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time (Ge 6:5b). But can this evil tendency of the human heart be applied only to Noah’s time, and not our own? I cannot but confess that such a wicked mind applies to me as well. Furthermore, Jeremiah 17:9 says that our hearts are fully defiled by evil thoughts and beyond cure. As a result, the Bible proclaims that we cannot have a pure heart by our own power. But this should not make us fatalistic and give in to evil. Jesus says in Luke 18:27, *“What is impossible with man is possible with God.”* With God’s help, it is possible. In the Old Testament times, God opened the way for people to come to him by sacrificing animals. The blood of animals sprinkled on the people purified them outwardly, so that they could worship God. However, the blood could not cleanse their hearts. This system was only 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 and shed his blood for our sins.

Jesus, the Son of God, became the Lamb of God whose blood can cleanse the corrupted 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 any sin. This perfect blood has tremendous power to cleanse and renew our hearts. When we come to God, we need to claim the blood of Christ. How can we claim the blood of Christ? 1 John 1:9 says, *“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 God just as we are, acknowledging our sins and simply trusting in the power of Jesus’ blood, he will forgive us and purify us from all our sins. As we trust in Jesus’ blood and his sacrificial love moment by moment, he will enable us to love him and love others from our hearts. The blood of Jesus is the key to genuine heart transformation to establish a community of genuine love and worship.

Second, by filling our hearts with Jesus. Once our hearts are cleansed, we need to fill our hearts with our Lord Jesus Christ. Filling our hearts with Jesus means to humbly acknowledge his kingship over our lives and entrust all areas of our lives to him so that he may fully reign within us. Furthermore, filling our hearts with Jesus is to think about Jesus and imitate his image. In Philippians 4:8, the Apostle Paul urges, *“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”* In this world, where can we find such noble, pure, and admirable things? We can find these things in Jesus. Jesus himself is the most excellent and praiseworthy One for us. His image is the most admirable for us to think about.

In Galatians 5:22-23, Jesus’ noble image is depicted as the fruit of the Holy Spirit that we ultimately need to grow to bear: Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These characteristics of Christ are totally opposite to the evil thoughts that defile our hearts and lead us to acts of the sinful nature (Ga 5:19-21). Jesus’ love is agape love. This love is not a feeling, but a choice of unconditional sacrifice to consider another’s needs as greater than one’s own, just as Jesus laid down his life for us on the cross. Jesus’ joy is not to be found in a fallen world, but joy through his fellowship with God the Father. His peace transcends earthly matters and is available in every situation, just as he slept in the boat amidst the furious storm (Mk 4:38). Jesus is patient with unworthy and unbearable sinners like us. The opposite of patience is agitation, discouragement, and a desire for revenge. But Jesus is patient and his patience ultimately leads sinners to repentance and salvation. Jesus is kind with his tender concern and compassion for his sheep. Jesus’ kindness leads him to rescue, protect, and provide for us. Goodness is Jesus’ desire to bless others, even though they are his enemies. The opposite of goodness is malice, the desire to inflict injury, harm, or suffering on another. While we were still God’s enemies, however, we were reconciled to him through the death of Jesus (Ro 5:10) because of Jesus’ goodness. Faithfulness is Jesus’ trustworthiness in his words, love, and goodness to us. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb 13:8). Jesus gives us the perfect picture of gentleness. Gentleness is meekness. It does not mean weakness but strength involving humility and restraining his power to submit to God’s will for our sakes. Self-control is, of course, the ability to control oneself. But Jesus came to this world as fully human like us and showed us how to overcome our own desires and temptations through his prayer life. To defeat Satan, he prayed for 40 days with fasting and to obey God’s will, he showed us his own prayer at Gethsemane until his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Instead of harboring evil thoughts in our hearts, we need to think about our Lord and imitate his image. In this way, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God will enable us to keep our hearts pure and grow in Christ’s image.

Third, by the word of God and through prayer. While inwardly filling our hearts with Jesus’ image, outwardly we must fight our spiritual battle. We must guard our hearts from our enemy, the devil and his evil forces. 1 Peter 5:8-9a says, *“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith…”* The word of God and prayer are the swords of the Spirit in our spiritual battle (Eph 6:17). Whenever the devil tries to plant evil thoughts and defile our hearts, we must immediately resist him by the word of God and rebuke him through prayer in Jesus’ name. He will flee from us (Jas 4:7).

God wants us to worship him with all our hearts. God sees and desires our hearts. The renewing of our hearts is essential to have a right relationship with God. Also, it is the true way of our transformation (Ro 12:2a). Thank God for granting us the way of transformation through our Lord Jesus Christ. May God bless each of us to give our hearts to God and experience the joy of intimate fellowship with him in Christ all the more!