

Heart of Worship, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: The Worshiper God Seeks: A Heart Matter

Matthew 15:7-9

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrinal issue in this lesson is the nature of acceptable worship, viewed from its dark side. Jesus, quoting Isaiah, exposes two fatal flaws that can hollow out even the most careful religion. The first is a heart that has wandered from God while the lips keep honoring him. The second is worship shaped by "the commandments of men," human traditions elevated to the authority of God's word, even to the point of setting aside what God actually commanded. Help your class see that these two errors often travel together. When the heart drifts, religion does not usually disappear; it hardens into form, and human additions multiply to fill the space where love used to be.

Be careful to present this in the positive, formative spirit your congregation values. The cure for vain worship is not less worship but a recovered heart and a renewed submission to God's word over human tradition. Jesus is not loosening the call to careful, authorized worship; in the same breath he defends an actual command of God that the Pharisees had nullified. The lesson is not that the heart matters and form does not, but that God seeks worshipers who bring both: a heart truly near to him, and a worship truly shaped by his revealed will rather than by our own inventions.

This lesson is also deeply formational, because the danger it names is a danger for the devout. The people most at risk of vain worship are not the careless but the careful, those who have done the right things so long that the doing can run on its own while the heart sleeps. Aim, then, not merely to inform your class about hypocrisy in the abstract, but to draw each person to honest self-examination, and then to hope. The God who exposes the distant heart does so in order to draw it back near, where worship becomes real again.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus quotes Isaiah to describe people who "honor me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (v. 8). What does this tell us about how God evaluates worship, and why is the condition of the heart, rather than the precision of the ritual, the decisive thing to him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with what God notices. The Pharisees were watching the disciples' hands; God was watching the Pharisees' hearts. Isaiah's words, which Jesus makes his own, locate the decisive issue not in the correctness of the ritual but in the nearness or distance of the heart.

Stress that this does not make outward acts optional. God gave commands about how to worship, and Jesus upholds them. The point is that outward acts are the body of worship, and the heart is its soul. A body without a soul is a corpse, however well dressed. Worship can be flawless in form and dead in substance.

Help the class feel the weight of the word “far.” The heart does not usually leave God in a single dramatic step; it drifts, a little at a time, until one day the lips are still saying the words and the heart is in another country. God measures worship by that distance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God evaluates worship by the condition of the heart, not merely the precision of the act (Matthew 15:8).
- Outward acts of worship are the body; the engaged heart is the soul.
- The heart’s distance from God can grow gradually and unnoticed.
- Acceptable worship requires the real engagement of the inner person.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between performing worship and offering worship?
- How can a person’s lips and heart end up in two different places?
- Why does God insist on the heart and refuse to be satisfied with the lips alone?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus calls the Pharisees “hypocrites,” a word that originally meant an actor wearing a mask. In what areas of your own spiritual life are you most tempted to wear a mask, to look more devoted on the outside than you are on the inside? Name one place where the gap between the appearance and the reality is widest.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a self-examining question, so create room for honesty rather than accusation. The Greek word behind “hypocrite” pictured a stage actor speaking through a mask. The Pharisees were not necessarily conscious frauds; many sincerely believed their own performance. That is what makes the warning so searching.

Invite students to consider the small, ordinary masks: the hearty singing that covers a grudge, the bowed head that hides a wandering mind, the reputation for devotion that outruns the private reality. Everyone wears some version of the mask, and pretending we do not is itself a kind of mask.

Turn the class toward grace. The answer to hypocrisy is not to perform better but to come clean, to let God see what is actually there. Jesus reserved his sharpest words for hypocrisy precisely

because masks keep us from the honest encounter with God that heals. Encourage students that taking off the mask before God is the first step back toward real worship.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Hypocrisy as the gap between outward appearance and inward reality.
- The subtlety of self-deception in sincere religious people.
- Honesty before God as the path out of hypocrisy.
- The healing that comes when we let God see what is truly there.

Discussion Prompts

- Where is the gap widest between how devoted you appear and how devoted you are?
- Why is hypocrisy often invisible to the hypocrite?
- What does it look like to take the mask off before God this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

God says through Isaiah, “in vain do they worship me” (v. 9). What does it mean for worship to be “in vain,” and how should it sober us that it is possible to perform all the right acts and still offer God nothing he will receive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Linger over the phrase “in vain.” It means empty, fruitless, to no purpose. The most chilling thing Jesus says here is that worship can be entirely wasted, offered and not received, performed and counted as nothing.

Help the class resist two wrong reactions. One is despair, the fear that none of our worship is acceptable; the other is presumption, the assumption that showing up automatically pleases God. The text steers between both. God is not impossible to please, but he is not pleased by mere performance either.

Connect this to the gospel of grace, not as a license but as the cure. Vain worship is the worship of those who are trying to honor God from a distance. The remedy is to draw near through Christ, with a heart reconciled and engaged. Worship becomes full again when the worshiper is truly near.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship can be offered and yet rejected by God as empty (Matthew 15:9).
- The difference between worship that is received and worship that is wasted.
- Neither despair nor presumption is the right response to this warning.
- Drawing near through Christ as the cure for empty worship.

Discussion Prompts

- What would make God count an act of worship as “vain”?
- How do we avoid both despairing and presuming about our worship?
- What restores fullness to worship that has gone empty?

Question 4

Student Question:

Empty worship usually does not announce itself; it creeps in as familiarity dulls our attention. What are the warning signs in your own life that your worship is drifting toward routine, and what has helped you, in the past, to bring your heart back when it has wandered?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question gets practical about drift. Empty worship rarely begins with a decision; it begins with familiarity. The hundredth time we sing a song or take the Supper, the act can run on autopilot while the heart attends to other things.

Ask the class to name their own warning signs honestly: boredom, going through motions, a mind that is already at lunch before the closing prayer, an inability to remember what was sung or said. These are not signs to despair over but signals to respond to.

Offer concrete remedies from their own experience and from Scripture: preparing the heart beforehand, actually attending to the words, fixing the mind on Christ during the Supper, coming with expectancy. The heart can be led back; the Spirit helps us, but we must give him our attention on purpose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Familiarity and routine as the seedbed of empty worship.
- The importance of recognizing the warning signs of spiritual drift.
- Practical disciplines that re-engage the heart in worship.
- The Spirit’s help joined to our deliberate attention.

Discussion Prompts

- What are the warning signs that your worship is sliding into routine?
- What has helped you bring a wandering heart back to God?
- How might you prepare before Sunday so your heart arrives ready?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus condemns “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (v. 9). In the surrounding verses the Pharisees had used their tradition to set aside an actual command of God (vv. 3–6). Why is it so serious to elevate human rules to the level of God’s commands, and how does that corrupt worship?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now address the second error, the one the surrounding context makes vivid. The Pharisees had a tradition (Corban) by which a man could declare his resources dedicated to God and thereby excuse himself from supporting his aging parents (vv. 4–6). A human rule had been used to cancel a divine command. Jesus calls this “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

Help the class see the mechanism. The danger is not having traditions; every congregation has customs. The danger is binding human traditions with the authority of God, so that “we have always done it this way” comes to carry the same weight as “thus says the Lord.” When that happens, the word of God gets crowded out or even contradicted.

Tie this to the positive principle your congregation holds. Worship is to be governed by God’s revealed will, not by human invention. This protects us in both directions: it keeps us from adding our own requirements as though they were God’s, and it keeps us from setting aside what God has actually said in favor of what we prefer. The authority is the word, gladly received.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The peril of elevating human tradition to the authority of God’s command (Matthew 15:9).
- Human rules can be used to nullify what God has actually commanded (Matthew 15:3–6).
- The authority of God’s word over all human custom and preference.
- Worship governed by revelation, not by human invention.
- The difference between an innocent custom and a bound tradition.

Discussion Prompts

- How does a human tradition gradually take on the authority of a command from God?
- Why is it so serious when tradition is used to set aside God’s word?
- How do we honor good customs without binding them as divine law?

Question 6

Student Question:

It is easy to confuse our own preferences, customs, and comfortable habits with the will of God. Where might you be holding a personal tradition or preference so tightly that you have begun to treat it as if God himself commanded it? How can you tell the difference between God’s authority and your own attachment?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the personal side of question 5. We all carry preferences and customs, and it is remarkably easy to baptize our own tastes as the will of God. The order of the service, a familiar style, the way things have always been done, these can quietly harden into untouchable law in our minds.

Help students examine themselves gently. The test is not whether we have preferences (we all do) but whether we have begun to treat our preferences as God's commands, judging others by them and resisting anything that disturbs them. Ask each person to name one place where their attachment may be stronger than the Scripture warrants.

Point toward the cure: a humble return to the text. When we are unsure whether something is God's authority or our own attachment, we ask what God has actually said, and we hold our customs with an open hand, ready to be corrected by his word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to confuse personal preference with divine command.
- The difference between God's authority and our own attachments.
- Humble submission to Scripture as the test of our traditions.
- Holding good customs with an open hand.

Discussion Prompts

- Where might you be treating a personal preference as if God commanded it?
- How can you tell the difference between God's authority and your own attachment?
- What helps you hold your customs with an open hand?

Question 7

Student Question:

Notice that the Pharisees were scrupulous about an external matter (hand washing) while neglecting the heart. How does this passage expose the danger of measuring our spiritual health by outward performance, and what does God look for instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw out the irony. The Pharisees were meticulous about hand washing, a matter of human tradition, while their hearts were far from God and they were nullifying his commands. They had a precise instrument for measuring the wrong thing.

Help the class see how easily we do the same: we measure spiritual health by attendance, by outward conformity, by the things that can be counted, while the heart goes unexamined. Outward markers have their place, but they make a poor scale for the soul.

Direct attention to what God actually looks for: a heart near to him, love, mercy, justice, faithfulness, the weightier matters. Worship that flows from such a heart is the worship he seeks. Encourage students to recalibrate, to ask not only “did I do the right things?” but “did I bring my heart?”

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of measuring spiritual health by outward performance alone.
- God’s concern for the heart and the weightier matters of the law.
- Outward markers as poor substitutes for the condition of the soul.
- Recalibrating our self-examination around the heart.

Discussion Prompts

- What outward markers do we wrongly trust to measure our spiritual health?
- What does God look for that no outward marker can capture?
- How would you measure the health of your worship by God’s standard?

Question 8

Student Question:

Jesus is not against careful obedience; he is against obedience that has lost its heart. What would it look like this week for you to bring your heart, and not merely your body, into each act of worship, whether singing, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, or giving?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Clarify what Jesus is and is not saying. He is not against careful obedience; in this very passage he defends a command of God. He is against obedience that has lost its heart. The goal is not to relax our worship but to re-soul it.

Make it concrete act by act. In singing, mean the words and sing to God, not merely along with the room. In the Supper, fix the mind on Christ’s body and blood. In prayer, actually pray rather than overhear. In giving, give from a glad and deliberate heart. Each act is a chance to bring the heart, not just the body.

Encourage a simple practice: before each part of worship, a brief inward turning to God, a reminder of who is being worshiped and why. Small acts of attention, repeated, retrain a drifting heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Careful obedience and a warm heart belong together, not in competition.
- Each act of worship as an opportunity to engage the heart.
- The re-souling of worship through deliberate attention.

- Bringing the whole person, body and heart, into worship.

Discussion Prompts

- Which act of worship most easily becomes routine for you, and why?
- What would it look like to bring your heart into that act this week?
- How can a brief inward turning to God change an entire act of worship?

Question 9

Student Question:

This passage holds two errors together: a heart far from God, and worship shaped by the commandments of men rather than the word of God. True worship must be both heartfelt and governed by God's revealed will, offered in the way he has authorized rather than according to human invention. How does this text warn us against worship that is sincere but unscriptural, and also against worship that is scripturally correct but cold and heartless? Why must we refuse to sacrifice either the heart or the truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal center of the lesson, so give it full attention. The passage condemns two errors at once, and they must be held together. The first is a heart far from God: worship that is doctrinally correct in form but cold and distant in spirit. The second is worship shaped by the commandments of men: worship that may be warm and sincere but follows human invention rather than God's revealed will.

Press the point that fixing one error while committing the other is no solution. Some react against dead formalism by saying the heart is all that matters and form is irrelevant, so that any sincere expression becomes acceptable worship. But that is exactly the road to "the commandments of men," worship invented by us rather than authorized by God. Others guard the form so zealously that the heart is forgotten, and they become the very Pharisees Jesus rebukes. The text closes both exits.

State the positive principle plainly. God seeks worship that is both heartfelt and true, offered from a heart near to him and governed by his word. This is good news, not a burden. We are not left to guess how to please God, nor are we reduced to going through motions. The Father has shown us how to draw near, and he invites us to do it gladly, with our whole heart.

Guard your class from using this text as a weapon. Jesus aimed it at the proud and the self-assured, not at the struggling. The aim of teaching it is not to arm us against others but to search our own worship, so that lips and heart and obedience all point the same direction, toward God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Acceptable worship must be both heartfelt and governed by God's word (Matthew 15:8-9).

- Sincere but unscriptural worship drifts into the commandments of men.
- Scripturally correct but cold worship is the hypocrisy Jesus condemns.
- We must refuse to sacrifice either the heart or the truth.
- God has revealed how he is to be worshiped; we gladly follow his pattern.
- The text is for self-examination, not for attacking others.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is fixing a cold heart by inventing our own worship no real fix at all?
- Why is guarding the form while losing the heart the very error Jesus rebukes?
- How is it good news that God has shown us how to worship him?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Isaiah's words as Jesus applies them: lips that honor, a heart that is far, worship that is vain, doctrines that are merely human. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to close the gap between your lips and your heart, and one concrete step you will take this week so that your worship is offered from a heart that is genuinely near to God.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use the capstone to gather Isaiah's four phrases as Jesus applies them: honoring lips, a distant heart, vain worship, human doctrines. Ask each student where, honestly, they see themselves in those words, and what God is calling them to change.

Press for one concrete step toward closing the gap between lips and heart. For some that means dealing with a sin that has quietly pushed the heart away from God. For others it means renewed attention in the assembly. For still others it means loosening a tradition they have bound too tightly.

End in hope and in Christ. The God who exposes the distant heart is the God who came near in his Son to bring us back. Worship becomes real again not when we try harder to perform, but when we return to him with our whole heart through Jesus. Send the class out longing to worship from a heart that is truly near.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-examination in light of Isaiah's words as Jesus applies them.
- The call to close the gap between the lips and the heart.
- Christ as the one who brings the distant heart near to God.
- Worship renewed through wholehearted return, not mere effort.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you see yourself in Isaiah's words, and what is God calling you to change?
- What one step will you take this week to worship from a heart near to God?
- How does returning to Christ make empty worship full again?