

Heart of Worship

Lesson 2: The Worshiper God Seeks: A Heart Matter -- Matthew 15:7-9

They had traveled a long way to find fault with him. The scribes and Pharisees who confronted Jesus in this chapter were not casual critics; they were the most religious men in the nation, experts in the law, careful keepers of a thousand small rules. And they had noticed something scandalous. Jesus' disciples were eating bread without first performing the ceremonial hand washing the elders had handed down. Not a matter of hygiene, but of tradition, a ritual added by men over the centuries until it carried the weight of a command from God. To these men, skipping it was a serious offense.

Jesus answered with a directness that must have stunned them. He did not apologize, and he did not quibble about hand washing. He reached back seven hundred years and pulled a verse out of Isaiah, and he aimed it straight at their hearts. "You hypocrites," he said. "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." It was a devastating word. Their worship, so careful and so public, was being declared empty by the very One they claimed to serve.

Sit with that phrase for a moment: in vain do they worship me. These were not pagans. They were not skipping the assembly or neglecting the offerings. They were at worship, lips moving, hands washed, rituals performed with precision. And God called it vanity, emptiness, a hollow shell. The problem was never the activity. The problem was a heart that had wandered far from God while the lips kept up appearances, and a religion so cluttered with human additions that the commands of God had been crowded out.

This is a sobering lesson, and a searching one, because the danger it describes is not the danger of irreligion. It is the danger of the religious. We can sing every verse, take the Supper every week, bow our heads for every prayer, and still be a thousand miles from God in our hearts. We can hold our traditions so tightly that we mistake them for the voice of God himself. Jesus will not let us measure worship by the lips alone. He sends us looking for our hearts. Read his words slowly, and let them ask the one question that matters most: when I worship, where is my heart?

Group Discussion: Jesus says it is possible to honor God with our lips while our hearts are far from him. Why do you think this kind of empty, going-through-the-motions worship is such a constant danger for religious people in particular, and how might a person drift into it without ever deciding to?

Personal Reflection: Think about your own worship over the past few months. Have there been times when your lips were moving but your heart was somewhere else entirely? What tends to

pull your heart away from God even while you are sitting in the assembly, and what does that reveal about what currently competes for your love?

Read Matthew 15:7-9

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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.
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 29:13–14, the original prophecy Jesus quotes, where the Lord rebukes worship that is mere human commandment learned by rote; 1 Samuel 16:7, the Lord looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart; Amos 5:21–24, God rejects feasts and songs offered without justice and a right heart; Psalm 51:16–17, the sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart; John 4:23–24, the Father seeks worship in spirit and in truth.