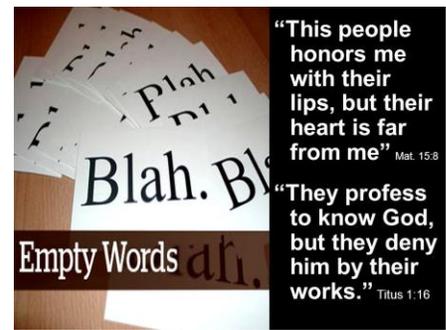


Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23



THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME

Deuteronomy 4:1-2. *“And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, gives you. ²You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.”¹*

- *“Give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live ...”* (v.1). Under the old covenant, life and prosperity (possession of the land) resulted from obedience to the law. The trouble, as we will see in this lesson, was that not even the best of men could always keep the old covenant.

None of this has changed under the new covenant except that now righteousness comes not through the efforts of men, but through the life of Christ in men. Jesus said, *“I am the vine, you are the branches”* (John 15:5). There is no clearer statement in the Bible of man’s relationship to God, and how men are to live.

- *“You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it ...”* (v.2). This short admonition sounds clear enough: Don’t try to change the rules. Yet this is what Israel did. It is right to interpret the rules in each situation, but not right to construct a legal system which distorts the original intent of the rules.

The Jews are not the only ones to have done this sort of thing. For example, if you are over seventy, you can probably remember when doctors made house calls. In those days every doctor swore to obey the Hippocratic Oath, and a doctor spent nearly all his working hours ministering to patients and their families. Today doctors swear by the same oath, yet spend a large part of their time on matters only remotely connected with ministering to patients. Sometimes, to avoid litigation, a doctor is forced to prescribe unneeded treatment or withhold needed treatment. The Jews added the Talmud (~500 B.C.) and the Mishnah (~200 B.C.) to the law. We have added HMO’s and Medicare to the Hippocratic Oath.

No one is really immune to this. There are always times when one is even tempted to use the law to do harm. In our society, if you hate someone, you can usually find a rule or regulation and use it to do him in. Obeying the rule is not sinful. Being motivated by hatred is sinful. This is why we need Christ.

Deuteronomy 4:6-9. *“Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ ⁷For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day? Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children ...”*

- *‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’* (v.6). Other nations really did say these things about Israel in their early history. Ruth, a woman of Moab, chose to stay with Naomi: *“Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”* (Ruth 1:16). David asked, *“What other nation on earth is like thy people Israel, whom God went to redeem to be his people ...?”* (2 Sam 7:23). In those days, people could see that the people of God were different – *a wise and understanding people*. Today things are different in the Middle East. Israel is threatened on all its borders, and although the Jews are still distinct as God’s chosen people, they are no longer known universally as “wise and understanding.” What happened?

¹ Bible quotations are from the RSV.

A thousand years passed, and by the time Jesus came, the scribes and Pharisees, charged with keeping the law, were using it in ways God never intended. They used the law to promote themselves, and to persecute those they disliked among their own people. Jesus was very angry at this behavior: “*You outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity*” (Matt 23:28).

So here is the problem, not only with the scribes and Pharisees, but with humanity in general. Jesus exposed the problem because he came to redeem men from being enslaved by it. The problem is *sin* in all mankind, and Jesus Christ himself is the solution. Let us now see what he said about this in Mark 7.

Mark 7:1-8. *Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, ²they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.)*

⁵And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?” ⁶And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ ⁸You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men.”

• “*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me ...*” (v.6). Discuss Isa 29:13-16, “*Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote; therefore, behold, I will again do marvelous things with this people, wonderful and marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hid...*” The Jews were obeying the letter rather than the spirit of the law. They were doing things for effect, not out of reverence. In other words, eating with unwashed hands is not a good idea, but trying to honor God with hypocrisy in your heart is a lot worse.

God had foreseen these things long before and proclaimed through Isaiah the *marvelous things* he would do when the time came. When Jesus Christ was born, the time for these things had come.

Mark 7:14-23. *And he called the people to him again, and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him.” ¹⁷And when he had entered the house, and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰And he said, “What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. ²¹For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, ²²coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.”*

• “*There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him*” (v.15). Clearly, Jesus was speaking of food here. Things we see and hear, and even what we eat, drink, smoke, etc., can incline our hearts one way or the other. Yet (and this is difficult to understand), the real source of evil is *within*, not without. There are two arguments in favor of this idea:

1. Imagine moving into a perfectly sinless world, where all your needs are met and everyone is without sin. Being thus removed from all these “causes” of sin, are you now free from sin? Of course you are not.
2. One Person you know has been *tempted as we are, yet without sin* (Heb 4:15). Jesus, a man like us, proved that a pure and sinless heart is what it takes to walk through this world of evil and never sin. The conclusion here is that even though we are free to obey God, we nevertheless “*leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men*” (v.8). The only person who never did this was Jesus.

This lesson presents a sad picture of human nature. Sin is the fatal disease of the soul to which no one bears immunity. But God, who has created you and knows this, has loved you and provided the cure. He has sent his Son to die in your place. The only way for you to be saved is to realize your condition and accept God’s amazing grace. Will you do this today, and receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?