

Pentecost 13 / August 22, 2021

Mark 7:6

“This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”

There are various kind of service. There is self-service, where you serve yourself. There is in person service, where a person serves you. There is remote service, where a person uses technology to tell you how to serve yourself. Then there is lip service, where someone serves either without putting their heart into it, or with a self-serving attitude; serving someone simply in order to get something from their service. Israel was commanded to worship the Lord their God and to serve Him alone. They were to honour Him, by serving Him with their worship and by serving one another in love. They were to do this, not in order to gain God’s favour or to receive any blessing, physical or spiritual. They were to do this as a response of love, because God had already blessed them with His favour in making them His people and richly bestowed upon them, every blessing of body and spirit.

In our gospel Jesus chastises the religious leaders of Israel for honouring God with their lips, while their hearts were far from Him. He quoted words Isaiah had spoken against the people of his day, six centuries earlier. Instead of serving God in gratitude for the gift of His love, they sought to earn God’s favour by their zeal in obeying God’s commands. They served out of their own self-interest, seeking to earn God’s blessing and to avoid responsibility to others. Instead of honouring God by loving one another deeply and serving each other from the heart, they only did what they felt the letter of the law required them to do. Furthermore, they felt free to interpret the letter of the law to their benefit, in order to limit their obligation to others. In our gospel Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for using their interpretation of the law to evade their responsibility to care for their parents, because they had dedicated themselves to God.

God does not want us to approach Him on the basis of the law, presenting our obedience as a bill, which He is obligated to pay by blessing us. God approaches us on the basis of His love, by which He pays the debt of our sin and blesses our spirits with forgiveness and our bodies with every creaturely comfort. God does not want us to evade our responsibilities under the law. He wants us to honour Him with our worship of Him and service to others; not as a legal contractual obligation, but as a heartfelt response to His love, which He so richly and freely bestows upon us for the sake of Christ Jesus. In whom we receive the fullness of His love and every spiritual blessing in time and for eternity. We honour God by opening our hearts to His love in Christ our Saviour.

The people of Israel, especially the religious elite, the scribes, Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, put their whole heart into outwardly honouring God. They went beyond what God commanded. They added hundreds of extra rules to the commands and ordinances God gave through Moses. In the letter to the Romans, Paul wrote of his fellow Israelites saying, “They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” The knowledge they lacked was knowledge of God’s love. They had a zeal for God, but their hearts were far from Him. They served God, not out of love, but with their own interests at heart. They sought to obtain the righteousness of God, not through faith, but by works of obedience to the law of God and the traditions of their elders.

Jesus was speaking directly to the religious people of first century Israel, addressing an issue of their hearts, but His words also speak to our hearts today. Do we honour God with our hearts and our lips? We should honour God with our lips by praying, praising and giving thanks. We dis-honour God when we expect a benefit for our service. It’s a manifestation of our sinful nature to feel we deserve something extra from God, in return for our service. It’s in our nature to think that God will be more disposed to answer favourably, if we augment our prayers with certain acts of devotion. We naturally approach God with our lips, our own works. But God wants us to approach Him through faith, honouring Him with our hearts by receiving His mercy for the sake of Christ.

God wants us to believe He loves us, knows what we need and works to meet our needs, even before we ask Him. When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, He said they should begin knowing and believing that their Father in heaven loved them and wanted to give good things to them. He said they should pray believing He already was answering their prayers, even before they prayed. He said, “When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.” He told them that God hears our prayers because He is our Father. He answers our prayers because as our heavenly Father, He loves us. We know He loves us because He gave His Son Jesus to be our Saviour! We honour God with our hearts and with our lips, when our hearts are united with the heart of His love in Christ Jesus.

Israel didn't serve God half-heartedly. They had a zeal for God. There were no people in the ancient world as zealous for their god as, Israel was for the Lord. As a sign of loyalty and a pledge of allegiance, the Romans demanded all subject peoples worship the emperor and offer sacrifice to Caesar as a god. Only Israel was exempted. Israel was not exempted as a special favour of Roman benevolence. They were exempted because of their absolute refusal to worship any god but the Lord. The Pharisees, to whom Jesus spoke in our gospel, were the most zealous of all. In order to become a pharisee a man had to memorize the bible. Not just the names of the books, but the books themselves! A dedicated Pharisee like Paul, would also have memorized the rabbinic commentary, known as the Talmud. These people had a zeal for God! It seems strange that Jesus would say that their hearts were far from Him.

When these people debated with each other, they didn't come to the debate with a wagon of scrolls. They quoted the scriptures and their elders by memory. These people had a zeal for God, but still Jesus said, "This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me." The problem was not their outward dedication. The problem was their religious zeal was a mask for their inner uncleanness. Jesus said they were like white-washed tombs which look beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead peoples' bones. The outer cleanness covered the inner uncleanness of their sin. Their zeal did not take away their sinfulness, or cleanse them from their sin. In fact, their sinfulness was manifested in their zeal for the Lord. They served as those who expected a reward. Their sin was exposed in the way they treated other people, holding their righteousness over the sins of others and interpreting the rules so they could avoid rendering assistance to the needy, even their own parents. They used their zeal for the Law to their benefit!

Jesus criticized them, because they did not recognize their sinfulness or come to God for His forgiveness. They came to God with their own righteousness, based on their religious zeal, the service of their lips. We can make the same mistake. It's easy to look at the good things we do and overlook the bad. We can see the good things we do as making up for the bad. Instead of seeking forgiveness, the Pharisee in the temple thanked God he was not a sinner. He proved it by reciting all the good things he had done. St. Paul was once a Pharisee. He knew what it is to have a misplaced zeal for God and to approach Him on the basis of human service; memorizing the contents of the whole bible, saying grace before, during and after each meal. In the letter to the Philippians he said, whatever gain he had from his zeal for the law was worthless, in comparison with the surpassing of worth of knowing Jesus as Lord and receiving from Him, the righteousness which comes by faith.

God wants us to honour Him with our lips. He wants to pray, praise and give thanks. He wants us to honour Him with the actions of our lives, loving one another and serving each other from the heart of His love. We honour Him first and foremost, by acknowledging our sinfulness, confessing our sins and receiving His love in forgiveness for the sake of Christ our Saviour. He expresses the heart of His love in giving Jesus to be our Saviour. We honour God, by opening hearts to receive His love in Christ Jesus. We honour God, by opening our lips to praise Him for His mercy in Christ our Saviour. We offer Him our highest praise and honour Him most highly, by holding Jesus in our hearts as our greatest treasure and loving one another deeply, from the heart. God grant this to us always. In Jesus' Name. Amen.