

THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION BY JESUS

Years ago Carlos Santana and Rob Thomas of the band Matchbox Twenty collaborated on a song titled *Smooth*. It won multiple Grammy Awards and at one point was ranked by Billboard as the second most successful song of all time. The most memorable phrase from the song was the line, *"give me your heart, make it real, or else forget about it."* It was a song full of love and longing for a heart-deep relationship. To be on the receiving side of that kind of love is affirming because someone wants you but it is challenging because they want your heart and they want a relationship that is deep and real. In this passage from **Mark 7**, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah to make a similar point about God and his relationship to us. In **verse 6**, God speaks through Isaiah and says, *this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me*". Then he adds, *"in vain do they worship me."* What is he saying if not *"they are giving me something but it isn't really their hearts,"* so it is *"in vain."* Doesn't that mean, "forget about it."

This is our third message in the series, *Recovering Jesus* and one of the things we have to recover about Jesus is the truth that Jesus didn't come into the world to start a new religion with better rules and rituals. He came into the world to bring people who had drifted far from God into a relationship with God. Relationship with God is what we are made for. Our relationship with God is what we damage so deeply when we turn from God to find life and ultimate happiness in our achievements, or possessions, or adventures or even in our human relationships. Nothing ever ultimately satisfies us other than a deep relationship with God and part of the irony of life is that often even very religious people miss out on the importance of an authentic relationship with God. So there is a message in this passage for all of us. ***It's really a warning about keeping your heart close to God because religious tradition is no substitute for heart devotion.***

There are two sections to this story, in the first one Jesus responds to his critics and teaches us that we need to ...

I. BE CAREFUL TO KEEP OUR HEARTS CLOSE TO GOD.

The reason to be careful to keep your heart close to God is that religious tradition can blind you to what is most important. That's what happened with these people in the story, and it happens to us today.

It's good to remember that it was not the street people, the criminals and the obviously struggling outsiders who crucified Jesus it was primarily the very traditional religious people. This story from **Mark 7** mentions the Pharisees and teachers of the law. These were the very conservative religious people. They ask Jesus a question about washing, but it isn't driven by a concern for cleanliness. It's really about their religious traditions. **Verse 3** explains for the non-Jewish reader. It says, *For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders.* The NIV translates the word "properly," "ceremonially." The background goes back to some of the earliest books in the Bible like Exodus and Leviticus. In those books, God gave commands that the priests or others who were going to perform acts of worship had to wash beforehand. It was a way of symbolizing the importance of purity. Nobody else was commanded to do it but the religious tradition that developed followed the logic that if the priests *have to wash* before they worship, wouldn't it be better if we made it a rule for everyone? Then they went beyond that. Look at **verse 4**, *and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.*) There was a kind of logic to it. They thought, If it's better to wash ceremonially before acts of worship, then wouldn't it be even more better if we wash every time we come home from the marketplace? Who knows what we might have come in contact with? And if we need to wash ourselves shouldn't we wash our stuff so we avoid anything that might defile us?

Religious traditions are attractive. They make us feel good about ourselves. And they are a lot easier than changing your heart. The great commandment tells me to love God with all my heart and my neighbor as myself – How about I just substitute excessive washing for that? Our traditions can make us feel superior to others but they are not the true devotion God longs for. Jesus sees to the heart of the issue, and in **verse 6** He quotes God through Isaiah saying, *“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me...”*

He's saying...

A. Our religious traditions can be practiced faithfully even while our hearts are far from God.

Look at what God says through Isaiah; *"this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me."* What does that look like today? A young father who speaks up and speaks well of God in Bible

study but treats God as an afterthought in his daily life. The middle-aged woman sings at the church on Sunday but doesn't bring her true self, deepest emotions and real issues to God in prayer. He sees all the many ways all of us can settle for honoring some set of religious traditions while not continually bringing our hearts, to God and living life from the heart for God.

Do you know what the heart is in the Bible? It's not just what you feel as opposed to what you think. It is the center, the intersection, and source of what you feel, think and choose. Yes, the heart is the thing that got broken in ninth grade when what's-her-name said she just wanted to be friends. But it is not just emotion. It's that part of you that wells up not only with awestruck joy but also with the will and deep commitment when you hold your newborn baby and commit to care for that child. There's a dark side to it also. Take Jesus' words seriously when he says it is also that part of you that generates evil thoughts, theft, deceit, pride and all the other things Jesus named. It's emotion surrounded by all kinds of thoughts leading to all kinds of choices.

How are things with your heart? Not your family or finances or physical health or your career but your heart? Do you ever take time to think hard about that in the presence of God? A lot of people don't. There are things to do, people to see, emails to answer, meals to fix, projects to complete. It is easy never to find or take the time to monitor your heart and your heart's nearness to God. That line in the song, *Give me your heart, make it real, or else forget about it*, that line turns that love song into a love song with an edge to it. It delivers an ultimatum. Jesus is telling us is that this is what God wants from us; not just religion but relationship. He wants it real, and from the heart or else it is just hypocrisy, and we might as well forget about it.

In fact, Jesus goes farther and says...

B. Our religious traditions can even become an excuse for neglecting the simplicity of obedience to God.

In **verse 9** he says, *And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"* He gives them an example in **verses 10-13**. One way people kept the commandment to honor mother and father was by taking care of them in their old age. Before there was Social Security, there were children. You take care of them when they are little they take care of you when you are old. But the Jewish religious leaders developed a

tradition called *Corban*, which meant something like “an offering for the temple”. *Corban* was a kind of deferred giving. If you declared your possessions, “*Corban*” that meant it was all dedicated to God upon death. So you retained use of it during your life, but you deprived your parents of any support they might have received from it. A religious tradition that is *not* in the Bible used to rationalize breaking a command that *is* in the Bible. Jesus wants us to understand that simple childlike obedience to God, because of authentic love for God, matters more than any cherished tradition. Jesus once asked, *Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things that I say? In another place Jesus said, If you love me, keep my commandments.*

One of the dangers of religion is that it can so bend our perspective that things that are not clearly revealed in the Bible become huge issues for us while we blindly ignore things that God has clearly commanded us to do. In **Matthew 23:24** Jesus says, “*You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.*” In some churches a pastor can be filled with pride, treat people harshly but if he is a strong communicator and a leader who makes things happen so that the church is growing many people would just overlook the pride. But if I were to go out by the front door after church light up a cigarette and pour myself a glass of after-church-chardonnay, how long would that go on before someone confronted me about it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not going to do that and I’m not for that. However, the Bible doesn’t explicitly forbid a smoke or a sip of wine but it clearly tells us God *hates* pride. I don’t want gnats or camels in soup of life. But I do want to recognize the difference.

If we are not careful to keep our hearts close to God religious traditions can blind us to what is most important. Not only will religion blind you to what is most important; it will fail you in what is most important. That’s the lesson in the second part of the story, when Jesus pulls the people and the disciples aside.

He says, be careful to keep your heart close to God and...

II. BE CAREFUL TO MAKE YOUR HEART THE PLACE YOU START TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE.

Listen to **verses 14-23**: *And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵ There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” ¹⁷ And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about*

the parable. ¹⁸ And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

That’s quite a list, right? He’s saying...

A. The heart is the inward source of all the issues of life.

Jesus says if you want to overcome all the defiling toxins that undermine you and damage your life you have to start with your heart. Jesus is just taking seriously what the Bible always taught. **Proverbs 4:23** says. *Keep your heart with all vigilance. for from it flow the springs of life.* That's a neat verse. isn't it? Yes but. how seriously are you taking that? How vigilant is your guard over your heart?

B. How do we change our hearts?

Let me give you four biblical principles...

1. Bring your heart to God. **Psalm 51:11** says *create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right Spirit within me. Ultimately only God can cleanse our hearts.* God himself in his grace awakens our need for him, opens our heart to him, draws us to himself, and we respond by drawing near to him. We draw near to God in sincere God-responsive, God-dependent, prayer. Don't worship God with your lips and leave your heart far from him.

So bring your heart to God and...

2. Fill your heart with the light of God's truth. **Colossians 3:16** says, *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.* There is a way to relate to the Bible that is just religious. But there is also a way to read the Bible that is deeply relational. You don't just go to the Bible to get rules to live by but to the light of God's truth more deeply down into your heart. You bring your heart to God, sink your heart into his love and flood your heart – your deepest thoughts, most troubling emotions, and your motives with the light of his truth. To fill your heart with light like that you have to take time, get real, be honest, and open to listen.

Bring your heart to God, flood it with his light, and as you do...

3. Sink your heart into the love of Christ. At the end of **Ephesians 3** Paul prays that Christ would dwell in our hearts through faith and that we would be rooted and grounded in love and be able to comprehend the *what is the breadth and length and height and depth.*¹⁹ *and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

Have you ever stood on the beach and looked out at the Ocean and been moved by its beauty. There was a preacher from the 19th century named Octavius Winslow who wrote beautifully about this in an essay titled. *The Infinite Ocean of Christ's Love.* He pictured what we in Florida have all done. standing at the ocean looking out in awe at its business and its beauty. and he said with an even greater emotion we approach the infinite ocean of Christ love. He wrote this:

Bring your heart with its most profound emptiness, its most startling discovery of sin, its lowest frame, its deepest sorrow, and sink it into the depths of the Savior's love! Christ's love touching your hard heart will dissolve it! Christ's love touching your cold heart will warm it! Christ's love touching your sinful heart will purify it! Christ's love touching your sorrowful heart will soothe it! Christ's love touching your wandering heart will draw it back to Himself. Only bring your heart to Christ's love! Believe that He loves you, and just as love begets love, so the simple belief in the love of Jesus will inspire you...

Do you have a deep but simple belief in the love of God in Jesus?

There is a warning in the third chapter of the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 3:12 says, *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.* Two verses later he says, *"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...."*

Bring your heart to God, flood it with his light, sink it into his love and as then...

4. Live from the heart for him. **Ephesians 6:6** says that as Christians we are not to operate as people-pleasers but as servants of Christ. Then it adds this phrase, *"doing the will of God from the heart"*. When Jesus critiques religion, he's not saying the outside doesn't matter but that it is not the place to start. You have to start with the heart, but then from the heart you have to live your life for him.

There are all kinds of outward things that authentic Christians do that might look religious. We read our Bibles, We come faithfully to church. We do acts of love and mercy. We give away our money. We discipline ourselves for godliness but we don't settle for outward appearances. We live from our hearts for God. ***We know that religious traditions, and outward actions are no substitute for heart devotion so we keep our hearts close to God.***

Conclusion

In the original fairy tale version of *The Wizard of Oz*, the Tin man had once been a real man who was in love with a beautiful girl and dreamed of marrying her. The witch hated their love, so she cast a spell on him so that one by one he suffered a series of wounds and his limbs had to be replaced with limbs of tin. His limbs of tin allowed him to work like a machine so with his heart still alive and real he thought he could still love and win and make life work. But then the blows and wounds keep coming until even his heart was gone. He became a hollow man. Efficient but empty. In the book, he tells Dorothy, *"When I was in love I was the happiest man on earth, but no one can love who has not a heart, and so I am resolved to ask for a heart."* Life itself, and of course our spiritual enemy, can turn us into hollow people who can still function, who can even practice our religious traditions but have lost our heart or worse it has become something defiled within us.

The gospel tells there truly is one to whom we can go who can give us a new heart. In the book of Ezekiel, God spoke of the grace that he would bring through faith in Jesus. In **Ezekiel 36:26** he says. *And I will give you a new heart. and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

All of this is possible only because of the one who is at the center of this story. There is a cleansing we need that no religious tradition or action can ever accomplish. **1 John 1:7** tells us *the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all our sins.* There is a God who loves you and offers himself to you. He came into this world in Jesus. He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins so that we can be made right with and draw near to God through him. So that we can bring our hearts to God and flood our hearts with his light, sink our hearts into his love and live from the heart for him. Turn to Him, trust in him. Keep bringing your heart to him for him to renew and heal your heart.

Amen.