

## **“Lip-Service or Heart-Service?”**

*Proper 16 – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Series B – Mark 7:1-13 – August 26, 2018*

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **I.**

You’ve all heard the saying before, “If you’re gonna talk the talk, you better walk the walk!” We say this because we know people often have a habit of running their mouth, saying and promising grand things. But, can they follow through? Will they make it happen? Are they all talk? Or, are they the real deal? We also say this when people intend to be sincere. We wonder, are they “all talk” or will they follow through? “I’ll get you the money. I’ll be there to help. I won’t do it again.” But will they? Their lips might be talking, but their legs aren’t always walking. Their mouths might say something, but their actions say otherwise, often proving their hearts were never really in it.

The same could be said not only for our daily lives, but for our lives of faith. We hear people say what they believe, and we want to believe them, but sometimes when we look at their behavior, we are not so sure. It’s been a problem for God’s people for a long, long time. The great prophet Isaiah once wrote about how the Israelites liked to “talk the talk” but weren’t all that good at “walking the walk.” The Lord spoke through Isaiah and said, “This people honors me with their lips. But their hearts are far from me!” It was no better in Jesus’ day. The Pharisees, who you know to be the religious leaders, were very good and saying the right things on the surface. But, upon closer inspection, it was nothing but an empty religion. It was mere lip service. And so Jesus said, “Isaiah was right about you.” You pretend to say the right things, but your hearts are so very far from my own. And then He gives some examples of how this is so, and finally adds, “And many such things you do.”

### **II.**

If the Israelites were prone to render lip service alone, and not their hearts, and also the religious leaders in Jesus’ day, then it should not surprise us that we are inclined to do so as well. To honor God with our lips is to put on a show, to make things appear good, right, and salutary on the outside, but our words often hide the reality of our true sinful hearts, which too often are very far from God. I think it’s worth examining the ways we, us, you and me, honor God with our lips, while our hearts remain far from Him.

The first way, we do this is what I call “going through the motions.” The things we might be doing are not necessarily wrong in and of themselves. Going to church. Singing the liturgy. Singing a hymn. Confessing the Creeds. Saying a prayer. Our lips are doing good things. The things they are saying are give honor to God. On the outside it looks so good. But on the inside we know sometimes we’re just going through the motions. Our hearts aren’t in it. We are secretly bored. Or we’re daydreaming. We don’t even think about the things we’re saying. Our hearts are so far from the words that are coming from our mouths.

Have you been there? This might be the most common way we honor God with lip-service, but not with the service of our hearts. Martin Luther once remarked that the Lord’s Prayer was the “greatest martyr in the history of the church.” He reflected on how often we say and pray those words, but never even give a second thought to what we are praying for.

Another way we render lip-service but not our hearts is when we do things for the sake of the fact that that’s how it’s always been done. Again, what’s bad about this is not necessarily what’s being done in and of itself, but the fact that you care more about the act itself than the reason for the act. I call this the “we’ve always done it that way” syndrome. That’s what’s going on in our Gospel reading today with the Pharisees. They were picking on the disciples for not washing their hands before eating. They, according to tradition, always washed their hands. But they’d done it so long they couldn’t even really say why. Now, there might have been a good reason for the tradition, a way to teach sanctity and holiness before partaking in God’s gifts. And when that is known, and the heart recognizes that, then the washing had meaning. But to wash for the sake of washing, without recalling the reason why, well that was just empty tradition. And to think, they criticized others for not just going along with the “way it’s always been done!” This attitude invites Jesus’ rebuke.

You know our liturgy is a beautiful thing. It is a gift from saints in the church past through the centuries. The best of the best was handed down to us to use for our benefit and edification. But it just doesn't matter whether you sing the Gloria in Excelsis, or the Sanctus, or the Agnus Dei if you're doing it just because that's what we always done, and your heart has long forgotten, or never even has taken the time to understand why. A pastor once taught a woman why we sing the Nunc Dimittis after communion. "That's the song of Simeon," the pastor taught her. "Remember, old Simeon in the Temple on the day of Jesus' naming. Simeon had been told he'd see the Lord's salvation before he died. And so the day Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to be circumcised, Simeon held the baby high in his arms and proclaimed, "Now, Lord, now your servant can depart in peace. For I have seen the salvation fo the Lord!" "And so," the pastor continued, "we borrow these words from Simeon in worship. Just after we too have beheld the body of blood of Jesus at the altar of Holy Communion, we too return to our seats and sing. Having just received forgiveness and seen the Lord's salvation, we too can depart in peace!" That woman returned from communion with tears in her eyes the next Sunday. After that, she never sang the Nunc Dimittis quite the same way again!

So, we honor God with our lips, and not our hearts, when we "go through the motions" or when we do things for the mere sake of tradition without knowing why, because we've "always done it that way." Again, these things invite Jesus' rebuke, no less for us than it did for the Pharisees. But there are more grave ways our hearts stray far from the heart of our Lord. One way is when our own personal "pet peeves" become more important than God's priorities. This happens when we make up things God has not commanded, and make them the most important thing rather than what God has spoken. You heard what the Pharisees were doing. They would not help their mother and father with the money they had designated for the offering in God's house. This was indeed a "pet peeve." Time honored tradition, and practice, and teaching said messing with this money, called "Corban" was something you just plain didn't do. In their minds, this was a high priority. But in God's eyes, it was a much higher priority to care for one's mother and father! And so Jesus tells them they are essentially nullifying, making void, tossing out God's priorities for their own traditions, for their pet peeves, for what they think is important. And that's not good!

Oh, as Christians, we love to invent our own "rules" all the time. We like to decide what's really important in the lives of our faith, and we look down our noses at others who would violate what we've raised up and esteemed. But the truth is, if we measure our priorities by God's Word, we might find that what we think is important is a bit misguided! We might think it's important to worship a certain kind of way, or how we dress at church, or how long a sermon should be, and on, and on. Sometimes these things are what the Reformers called "adiaphora," that is, they are neither commanded by God nor forbidden by Him, and while we might have a preference, He doesn't! We are wrong to let these man-made priorities, these personal pet-peeves, supplant the priorities of the One True God.

Now, there are probably countless ways the sinful people of God invent as ways to render lip-service and not heart-service. But I'd like to consider one more, perhaps the most vile and evil of them all. And this is when Christians pay lip-service to Jesus, and the Gospel, but their teachings and their behavior are so incredibly far from what His Word actually says. When people proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but distort the gift of grace in baptism, or deny His presence in the Supper, though a lot of things they say sound very good on the surface, there's a part of their own hearts that is not aligned with the heart of our Lord. When people say they trust in Jesus for salvation, but don't acknowledge and support the gift of life in the womb, they might honor God with their lips, but their hearts are surely evil. When so-called Christians sing their praise on Sunday mornings but won't acknowledge and stand-up for God's design for marriage because it's no longer popular in our society, then despite what their lips might say, their hearts are far, far from God's own. The list could go on. I'm afraid some in this category might be the ones of whom Jesus is speaking when they stand before God on judgment day and He tells them, "Not everyone who has called me Lord with their lips will enter the kingdom of heaven." And the people will protest, and their lips will proclaim all the good things they did in the name of the Lord while on earth. But Jesus, knowing the truth, that all along their hearts were far from Him, will reply: "I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matthew 7:21-23).

### III.

So how do we ensure we are not merely paying lip-service to God, but that our hearts are truly one with His own? Well, it takes our time, and energy, and attention, and that's part of what living the Christian life is all about. When you do the things of God, you engage your entire being in them. Will it take a little extra work? Sure it will. But what else is so worthy of your devotion? You don't have to throw out all your traditions, but you do need to take the time to understand them. Why do we sing this song in worship, you might wonder? If you don't know, seek to learn it. Most traditions started for a good reason, and have value, but, if there is no reason for it, or no longer value in it, be willing to throw it away. Don't continue to even give it lip service.

Be willing to set aside personal preference for the greater things of God. Is Bible study your number one thing? Why? Is that something Jesus is concerned about? Perhaps He is. Maybe there's bigger fish to fry. There's not always a clear answer. But we should probably be more worried about reaching out to those who are no longer in church than worried about whether the people who are in church might be breaking some unwritten taboo by sitting in our pew.

And remember, that what's popular is not always right, and what's right is not always popular. Being and LCMS Lutheran in America in the 21st-century is only going to get harder, and more difficult. It will be so tempting to follow the wide path that leads to destruction because so many will be walking it alongside you. The narrow way will seem so puny, and small, and insignificant. But the narrow way is where the heart needs to be, regardless of what others' lips might be saying.

### IV.

Will you mess these things up from time to time? You bet. And believe it or not, Satan wants you to honor Jesus with your lips. Because he knows then you might even be tempted to pretend your heart is always in the right spot as well, even when it's really not. So the thing to do is recognize when it's not, and repent of it, and seek God's forgiveness.

Jesus did not honor sinners with his lips on earth. But His heart was always in the right spot. Every time He encountered a sinner He called them out. Hardly honor. But that's because His heart was aimed at their salvation, not their approval. With his lips Jesus told us He came to seek and save the lost. He told us He came to give His life as a ransom for many. And His heart was in it. He didn't just talk the talk, He walked the walk. He didn't just say He loved us. He showed us He loved us, as He carried the cross, slowly, step by step to Calvary. And as He died His lips pleaded that the Father would forgive us, because all too often we don't even realize the evil we do.

And those who will honor Jesus with both their lips and their hearts, those are the ones He has promised to honor with His lips on the lastday. Scripture says that whoever acknowledges Him, He will acknowledge before His Father in heaven. Scripture says that Jesus will stand at our graves and call us forth to eternal life, by the power of the breath of His lips. And as He places the crown of glory upon your brow, Jesus will honor you with His lips one more time as He says to you, those who have persevered, who have fought the fight, and kept the faith, "well done, thou good and faithful servant. Come, now, inherit the kingdom which I have prepared for you from before the foundation of the world." This is just the kind of promise that not only makes your lips want to say, "Yes, Jesus let me serve You," but might even make your heart want to jump in and follow.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He who has ears to hear, let Him hear.