

The title for today's message is: **It's About Your Heart**

Jesus said: **These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me.**

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, through the power of your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds to your Word for our lives, that has been revealed to us through your Son, Jesus Christ. And through the same Spirit, give us the courage and wisdom to embrace Your will for our lives, that we might truly worship You in spirit and truth, and serve Your kingdom through the witness of our lives. This we ask in Christ's holy name. Amen.

There's a story about how in 1903 the Russian Czar noticed a sentry posted on the Kremlin grounds for no apparent reason.

When he inquired, he discovered that in 1776 Catherine the Great found on that very spot the first flower of spring.

She ordered that a sentry be posted there so that no one trampled that flower. So - a sentry was dutifully posted on that spot for the next 127 years!

Some traditions are hard to end. One of the greatest minds of modern Christianity wrote: "Tradition is the living faith of those now dead.

Traditionalism is the dead faith of those still living." Now he was not knocking tradition. In fact, he was a staunch supporter of tradition.

What he was knocking was a blind adherence to traditions by simply going through the motions without a heart commitment.

In today's Gospel Lesson, we find such a situation. About 500 years before Jesus was born, a group of people emerged whose interest was the letter of the law.

As time passed, they evolved a detailed code of 613 rules that regulated Jewish life down to the smallest details.

They redefined God's decrees according to their own way of thinking and demanded that everybody live accordingly.

They accused anybody who didn't follow these rules of not honoring God. By the time of Jesus – this had turned into traditionalism gone amuck.

For example, they developed a very elaborate hand-washing law. Before they ate, 1½ egg-shells of water had to be poured over the hands.

But this couldn't happen in just any manner. It had to be done just so. The hands were held with the finger-tips upwards.

The 1½ eggshells of water was then poured over them until it ran down the wrists. Each palm was then cleansed with the fist of the other.

Then, the hands were held with the fingertips pointing downwards. Water was poured on them from the wrists downwards so that it ran off at the fingertips.

Now, mind you, this was not a matter of hygiene. It was a matter of ritual. It had to be done even if a person's hands were spotless.

You see, to them it was needed in order to please God. And not to do it exactly this way was considered a sin.

So when the Pharisees and Scribes saw that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before they sat down to eat, they went berserk.

They blamed Jesus! "You are not teaching your disciples to honor God like our ancestors did."

Their target was Jesus and by saying this they implied that Jesus was not from God.

Now let me ask you a question: What's the real problem with the position that the Pharisees and Scribes took?

I mean, what's wrong with wanting to honor tradition? And today – given what we know about H1N1 flu viruses – it even seems that hand washing is not such a bad thing!

The real problem was a heart problem. You see, their laws and traditions had become more important than what God was doing through Christ.

Man's laws were placed over God's. And that is tantamount to calling God a liar.

At the end of the day, people were being misled and souls put in danger by man's traditions.

Because of this, Jesus spoke strong words of condemnation to the Pharisees. He called them hypocrites.

Jesus said in Matthew chapter 23: ***"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!***

***You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to..."***

And, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert.

And when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are..." Pretty harsh, don't you think?

You see, the traditionalism and legalism of the Pharisees was costing people their very souls! And Jesus called them on it.

He said, ***"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."***

Jesus said this about the Pharisees of his time, but it isn't unusual to find the spirit of the Pharisees alive and well to this very day and age.

A Congressman addressing House of Representatives said: "Never before have I heard such ill-informed, wimpy, back-stabbing drivel as that just uttered by my respected colleague, the distinguished gentleman from Ohio."

You know, we all have that sort of inconsistency going on in our lives. Mark Twain once said, "We're all like the moon.

We have a dark side we don't want anyone to see." Well, Twain's absolutely right! There is a side to each and every one of us that we don't want exposed.

We would be mortified if what was deep inside ever saw the light of day. So we cover it up – afraid to show it.

And we often do this through a thin veneer of blind traditionalism. But God demands a consistency between what we say and do and what we believe.

Without this, we may as well stay home and sleep in. You see, the outside is not what matters most to God. He's after your heart.

He wants the outside to match the inside. And God is the One at work, making the changes necessary to allow us to come to Him in true worship.

God is at work changing hearts through the forgiveness that Christ won on the Cross! Ezekiel chapter 36 prophesied about God's people.

He said: ***I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.***

Have you ever felt like you can't possibly measure up? Have you ever felt like there is no way that you will be able to please God because as you take inventory of your life – it falls short?

That's actually a very good sign, dear friends. This is true because when you recognize that, you know that we cannot ever live in a way that honors God perfectly.

We need help. We need new hearts. And that is precisely what God gives to us in Christ. This was something that Jesus told his followers up-front.

He said in John chapter 4: ***“Indeed, the time is coming, and it is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.***

***The Father is looking for people like that to worship him. God is a spirit. Those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”***

You see, worship of God is not about rules and regulations. Honoring God is about meeting Him on his terms.

Worship is about coming to God to receive from Him new hearts! Worship is not about coming together to do something for God.

But rather to gather, so that God can do something for us, such as pour out His forgiveness.

And to trade our blood-guilty, sinful nature with the perfect, holy righteousness that Jesus won for us on the Cross.

Only by grace ...only through faith in Christ. My friends, Jesus has set us free from the burdens of the law.

He has taken away the burden of having to live up to the demands of blind traditionalism. He has set us free to love and to serve.

When we recognize this, God reshapes our hearts and minds and allows what is on the inside to honor Him by expressing itself in love for Him and for our neighbor.

Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all. Amen.