

Lip-service Religion

It is always a delight to observe the Lord Jesus coming to the defence of His friends. Here a group of scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem accused the disciples of breaching some detail of the Jewish religion concerning hand-washing. In all likelihood they had, but the Lord would have none of it. He at once turned these allegations back upon the accusers exposing their own hypocrisy. How dare they accuse anyone of breaking the commandments of men while they themselves blithely ignore the commandments of God.

A lesson for us

Some might question the relevance of this passage for faith today when it seems to dwell on matters peculiar to Jewish religion and ritual. However, we have already seen how all the Lord's parables, miracles and doctrine are designed to teach His disciples and His church a lesson. Nor shall we be disappointed here. The Lord's words, 'This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me' brings us all within reach of His message. Lip-service religion is what the Lord detests, yet we must acknowledge its widespread presence in our churches today.

Think what you are saying

Hymn singing and prayers, reading Scripture and even preaching, readily lend themselves to the possibility of honouring the Lord with our lips, while remaining distant from Him in our hearts. I wonder if much of our congregational singing does not make liars of us with its pious assertions of devotion. Are our affirmatory 'Amens' after public prayer uttered merely by custom? There is no place in divine worship for lip-service, yet much of what is said and done in our gatherings is undertaken carelessly and thoughtlessly.

New birth necessary

We could, of course, say much about our approach to worship. There are many things we ought to pay attention to, such as thoughtful preparation, punctuality, concentration and a humble attitude while coming into the presence of the Lord. But there is a much deeper significance here, too. It is possible to worship God outwardly with every appearance of propriety while in fact our souls are dead to Him, and our hearts are stony cold. True worship is spiritual worship and spiritual worship is possible only where a soul has been born again.

God is not mocked

Surely this was the lesson for the disciples then, and for us now. Worship is a spiritual act and must be offered by faith. These men with their precise rules and religious pedigree might impress other men, but they did not impress God. Nor did they deceive the Son of God. They came splitting hairs about hygiene but the Lord looked into their hearts and saw all the dirt, filth and wickedness they never could wash out and which must forever damn them to hell.

Jesus Christ crucified

To worship aright is to worship in spirit and truth and that means to worship God as He requires. It is approaching Him upon the merit of Jesus Christ crucified for sin; by the Way He has ordained. It is pleading Christ's blood to cleanse us from sin, and God's righteousness imputed to justify. It is to offer our gratitude, and attribute all honour to Jesus Christ alone under cover of atonement, divine satisfaction and complete reconciliation. Such worship is forthcoming only from those whom Jesus Christ has redeemed and God the Holy Spirit has quickened.

This being so, everything in our worship ought to be directed to honouring the Lord with our hearts, as well as with our lips. We come to honour Him, not to lift up men and women. We come to praise and thank the Triune God for accepting us in Jesus Christ, not to revel in our accomplishments and abilities. Worship is for God. It isn't for me.

An old hymn writer once wrote,

I I often say my prayers;
But do I ever pray?
And do the wishes of my heart
Go with the words I say?

2 I may as well kneel down
And worship gods of stone,
As offer to the living God
A prayer of words alone.

3 For words without the heart
The Lord will never hear;
Nor will he to those lips attend
Whose prayers are not sincere.

4 Lord, show me what I need,
And teach me how to pray;
Nor let me ask thee for thy grace,
Not feeling what I say.

John Burton