

Empty Words from Empty Hearts

Many of the Old Testament prophets preached a combination of woes (or judgments), regarding the then and current state of Israel as well as warnings of impending destruction of that nation. However, they always spoke of a restoration of Israel at some future point. The goal of what the prophets preached was to do three things; first, get their attention to have the people admit their sin and rebelliousness. Second, to help the people *avoid* their own destruction by turning *from* their rebelliousness, and third, to help them understand that one day, Israel would experience a renewal of an entire remnant in spite of that nation's constant waywardness.

Because of that, much of the Old Testament is directly connected to and meant for the nation of Israel. At the same time however, there is much that applies to Christians today in principle or application. We would do well to heed what the Word of God is telling us even if by way of Israel's example.

A case in point can be found in **Isaiah 29:13**.

*Inasmuch as these people draw near with their mouths
And honor Me with their lips,
But have removed their hearts far from Me,
And their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men...*

What is interesting about the above verse is not necessarily the first three lines - though they've obviously important. What is really important is the fourth line because it is the *result* of the first three lines. I'd like to break it down and since we've been talking about the "fear of the Lord," it is ironic the way God Himself - speaking through Isaiah - bemoans the fact that the "fear of the Lord ("their fear toward Me"), is something that was "*taught by the commandment of men.*" I find that fascinating because in that one sentence, God sums up the problem that He saw with respect to the children of Israel and how they had come to view God.

Honestly, I believe that God could easily say this same exact thing about many churches and Christians today. Maybe He does. But let's look at it to see what God is actually saying. Of course, we know that Jesus echoed this sentiment in **Matthew 15:7**, referring to Isaiah's words specifically and calling out the religious leaders of Jesus' day on their hypocrisy.

God refers to the Israelites as people who *said* the right thing. To other people and even to themselves, they were "righteous" because they used the correct verbiage as they approached God. God said they honored Him with the things they said. The problem is that people cannot see into other people's hearts to know for certain whether what is being spoken is based on how they actually *feel* or not. We have to take things at face value unless the person actually pulls back the curtain and "slips" and actually speaks their mind.

Of course, this is not the case with God. He sees our every thought long before it is actually spoken. He knows the condition of our hearts. He knows what we really mean when we say something. Is our heart in it or are we just going through the motions?

People have a great ability to fool other people. In fact, there's an entire industry built around that ability and it's called *acting*. Top paid actors pull in millions of dollars for every project they're involved in. Apart from all those actors though are everyday people who are still able to act and often do so every day. They pretend to be one thing when they are not. They pull the wool over the eyes of other people. The best of these people are sometimes referred to as con artists because they have perfected ways to manipulate people through expressed words and apparent feelings. There are many examples of people being conned out of fortunes by brilliant con artists.

So for the average person to go through the motions of religion and impress other people that they are the real deal or truly love the Lord is not all that difficult to do. It happens. Some of the con artists mentioned above have wormed their way into pastoral or other leadership positions in large churches.

So we can easily see how people believe they can fool God into thinking they are sincere when they are not. But because God is God, we can never pull the wool over His eyes. Never.

But looking at the last sentence in **Isaiah 29:13**, we note that God is saying something very interesting there. He is essentially saying that what *should* be a genuine fear of the LORD, for who He is, His majesty and power, has been supplanted by teachers who teach and push the commandments of men. In essence, God is saying that even way back in Isaiah's day, Israel's leaders had begun incorporating their "traditions" and elevating them above the actual commandments given to the nation of Israel through Moses.

Traditions had become the virtue-signaling of the priests of Israel and later the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus called the religious leaders out on this problem during His day. In fact, Jesus continually cut to the heart of the matter with revealing admonitions like whoever looks upon a woman to lust after her in his heart has already committed adultery (**Matthew 5:28**). This truism confirms the fact that the heart's intentions and motivations are such that what God sees in the heart is equal to actions a person may or may not take. Just because a man does not physically lie with a woman he is attracted to in adultery, does not mean that he is not guilty of adultery if in his heart and mind, he is playing a movie of what it would be like to do so.

So the truth appears to be that God takes into consideration what transpires in our hearts, which is another way of saying the mind of our will. What we allow to live there is seen by God and if it transgresses His Law, it is an affront to Him because it is sin to us. Is it any wonder why Solomon wrote what he wrote in **Ecclesiastes 12:13**?

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.

It really does not get any simpler than that, at least to understand. Living it is another thing altogether and I've heard several people in my life tell me that obeying God is rather easy, yet looking back, it seemed obvious to me at the time that they lacked a fear of God. So, in reality, they said it was "easy" because they judged themselves on externals. Since they weren't living in adultery, cheating, lying or stealing, they assumed that their life was pleasing to God because they were in fact, being obedient to God's commands. Unfortunately, their obedience was

outward. It did not stem from an *internal* attitude that promoted righteous living. It was something they put on from the outside as a person would put on an overcoat to keep warm.

God is fed up in **Isaiah 29:13**. He wants no part of the constant sacrifices Israelites kept bringing when their hearts were not in it. In fact, at one point, God complains because many of the sacrificial animals brought to be offered to God were not "unblemished" as He required, but were blind or lame (**Malachi 1:8**). That is how far the Israelites had gone off the path of righteousness.

So now, it is time for us to consider ourselves. What is your heart's attitude toward God? What is mine? Am I withholding things from God that He rightly deserves? Am I pretending to be righteous externally while inwardly I've got areas of my life cordoned off from Him? In essence, am I a *pretender*; one who outwardly looks and may even act like what I think a Christian may be, but inwardly, my life is the complete opposite or at least is pitted with hypocrisy and sin?

God sees it. He sees all of it. The question often asked by people today who are being drawn by God to Him is "*What must I do to be saved?*" Of course, that is *the* question that needs to be asked. But there is a second question that all those who have received salvation must ask and it is not simply a once for all question either. It is not asked once and then forgotten like the salvation question. The question every Christian needs to ask him/herself daily is "*What must I do to be a true follower of Jesus?*"

If you are not asking that question; if I am not asking that question every single day and even often throughout the day as the Lord reminds us, then we are doing it wrong. We are in dire need of the Spirit's urging to remove ourselves from those things that keep us bound to our sin nature. Outwardly we may do many of the things that we are supposed to do so that to others, it looks like we are the epitome of being a devoted Christian. But if our inner life (our mind, our will, our thoughts and emotions), are doing something else that turns out to be sinful, we are really not truly devoted to the Lord, are we?

Yesterday, at church, the pastor preached a wonderful, expositional message as he continues to plow through Philippians. He was in chapter 4 where Paul talks about the need of two women to work out their problem. Apparently, they were at odds and it was causing division in that particular church. Paul wanted it dealt with because he knew that the two women loved the Lord and had worked very hard to help plant that church in Philippi. Yet, they had come to a disagreement over something that was becoming a fairly large wedge. It not only involved the two women but was working its way through that local body. If they did not work out their problem and agree to disagree in love, it would drastically affect that local group of believers and those who were not Christians in Philippi would notice and wonder, "*Hmmm, where is the reality of Jesus in them?*"

The Bible says as a person thinks of themselves so they are (**Proverbs 23:7**). We must take these words to heart and understand that what we are *inside* is what God takes into account. What we are on the *outside* is often not a mirror of who we actually are and God notices that, which is why the Bible also tells us that the heart is deceitfully wicked; who can know it? (**Jeremiah 17:9**).

I hate to be repetitive, but in reality, it appears that the only way our inner lives will be radically changed so that the life we live externally (what we say and do), is through a genuine, growing fear of the LORD.

The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, And He will show them His covenant. (Psalm 25:14)

The real Christian life begins from within a person and radiates outwardly. Anything else is simply *acting*.