

Vain vs Authentic Worship

Mark 7:1-15

Bryn MacPhail / Feb. 19, 2012

Over the last several weeks we have witnessed the *power* of Jesus on display as He calmed the raging wind and sea, as He healed a man inflicted by a legion of demons, and as He raised a little girl from the dead.

We have also noted how *tender* Jesus has been in His dealings with those who have been unwell and with those who have needed His help.

What we see in today's text is markedly different.

In Mark 7, we no longer see the *tenderness* of Jesus on display as much as we see the *toughness* of Jesus as He interacts with the religious leaders of the day.

There are occasions in the gospels when Jesus is full of compassion as He deals with people, and there are other times when we see Him being quite critical of others.

A casual observer might wonder if Jesus is a bit “moody” or if He is emotionally volatile.

But a closer inspection reveals a very distinct pattern.

Jesus exercises great patience and compassion when dealing with those in need.

And Jesus is openly critical of those who imagine that they have it all together.

The scribes and the Pharisees, in Jesus’ eyes, fit the latter category.

When Mark introduces **“The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem”**(7:1), he is telling us that this was an official delegation—something like a visitation from Presbytery.

These Pharisees and scribes had travelled some 90 miles in order to assess and evaluate the ministry of Jesus and His followers.

I gather it didn't take them long to drum up a complaint for their faultfinding mission.

As the religious leaders approach Jesus, opening pleasantries are bypassed, and the delegation immediately raise their complaint, **“Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?”** (7:5).

It should be noted that this ceremonial washing was not mandated in the Hebrew Scriptures, but the teaching of the Pharisees required it.

What is noble about the intention of such rules is the Pharisees' desire to be 'clean' in the eyes of God.

The Pharisees and scribes were correct in regarding God as holy, and rightly discerned their need to deal with the things that made them 'unclean'.

What Jesus was challenging, however, was *the source of their defilement*.

Jesus wants the religious leaders to know that it is not their habits of hygiene, which make them clean or unclean in the eyes of God.

But rather, it is the habits and condition of our heart, which determines our capacity to engage God.

Let's not miss how radically wrong Jesus regarded their position.

If their theological imbalance was only slight, Jesus might have offered an excuse saying, 'I do apologize. We have been traveling all day and were extremely hungry; we simply forgot—we'll do better next time.'

Or, if Jesus thought the position of the Pharisees had a modicum of merit, he might have said, 'Good question—let's sit down and talk about these washings. Why do you think they are so important?'

Instead, Jesus offers up a stinging rebuke: **"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are**

far from Me. They worship Me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.” (7:6,7).

I don't know about you, but I find it a bit frightening to hear that it is possible to engage in the activities of worship without pleasing God.

I gather from what Jesus says that it is possible to say a prayer; it is possible to sing a hymn; it is possible to listen to a sermon, without pleasing our Lord.

The Lord, speaking through the prophet Amos, says the same using the harshest of terms:

“(The Lord says) ‘I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring Me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, (and) righteousness like a never-failing stream’” (Amos 5:21-24).

Jesus calls the Pharisees to account for their *superficial approach to worship*. Jesus rebukes the religious leaders for not having their hearts engaged.

The Lord, through Amos, challenges *another kind of hypocrisy*. The Lord rebukes those who participate in religious ceremonies, but who fail to care for the poor and the vulnerable.

I don't think either of these errors can be confined to the past.

And, I don't mean to sound unkind when I suggest that each of these errors remain present in the modern church.

I don't even think it would be a stretch to suggest that this is a regular struggle.

Accordingly, we would be wise to do the earnest work of asking, 'To what degree are these errors present in my life?'

Are there occasions when I am just going through the motions on Sunday morning?

Are there instances where it could be rightly said of me that my heart is far away from God?

Do I have a measurable concern for the poor and vulnerable?

Friends, the serious tone of our Lord, both in Mark 7, and in Amos 5, should compel us to take inventory of motives and actions as they relate to worship.

What is motivating our attendance and participation in worship?

Are we here primarily for fellowship with our peers?

Are we here out of some sense of obligation or duty?

Has our attendance descended to a mere habit?

I'm mindful that the Lord, through Amos, and Jesus, in Mark 7, is the hardest on *religious leaders*.

I'm quite a bit unsettled by that.

Neither my theological training nor my pastoral experience can insulate me from the errors spoken of in today's passages.

I am equally at risk to come to worship with a misplaced focus.

I am equally at risk to forget the poor and to neglect the mission.

So, what exactly are we here for? What is the purpose of worship?

The grand purpose of worship is to bring glory to God.

And what we learn is that for God to be glorified in our worship, our focus needs to be on God and the things He values.

And the Amos text reminds us that God wants us to show our love for Him by the way we love and look after the practical needs of others.

If our primary motivation for worship is anything else, if worship becomes more about *what we want* than *what God*

wants, the response Jesus gives is this: “**they worship Me in vain.**”

These are tough words to be sure. And it’s not the case that we’ve just found Jesus in Mark 7 having a bad day.

This is the Lord’s consistent response to those who would attempt to worship Him with a misplaced focus.

So, what’s the answer?

The answer is to worship God with a heart that is wholly devoted to Him.

But, admittedly, that is easier said than done.

I don’t think any follower of Jesus intentionally attempts to worship God with a disengaged heart or a misplaced focus.

So, what do we do?

As I think about what massively determines the state of my heart for worship, the word, which immediately comes to mind is *preparation*.

In an exam, how well you do depends largely on your *preparation* for that exam.

In an athletic competition, how well you perform depends largely on your *preparation* for the competition.

In the business world, your capacity to sell a product depends largely on your *preparation* in understanding your product.

Well, think of worship as the grand business of heaven, and to succeed in it, we must diligently prepare.

And, not surprisingly, the best way to prepare ourselves for worship is through *prayer*.

I want to offer some specific guidelines around preparing for worship with prayer, but I want to first note to common ways we use the word worship.

Most of the time, when we talk about worship, we're talking about Sunday morning worship—we're talking about what we're doing right now.

But it can rightly be said that *worship is any action that is directed at the glory of God*. And, as such, worship can happen at any time and at any place.

The guidance I want to offer you this morning relates specifically to Sunday morning worship.

This is not advice that I have a proof text for. It is something I offer from my own experience to help us to meet the biblical requirement to worship God with hearts engaged.

I want to commend to you 4 key times for prayer that will greatly enhance your capacity to worship God.

Of course, pray as often as you will. Aim to pray unceasingly as the apostle Paul commends.

But if you are looking for a simple, achievable, prayer routine, this is what I recommend.

1. Pray on Saturday evening about Sunday morning

To achieve this you may need to limit your Saturday evening socializing. Or, at the very least, make sure you get home at a reasonable time.

Pray on Saturday evening that you get a good night's sleep.

I can't tell you the number of times I've been told by a person that their reason for not attending Sunday morning was related to a lack of sleep on Saturday evening.

To this end, pray for a good night's sleep. But also be praying for God to prepare your heart for Sunday worship with His people.

The second key time for your worship preparation is to pray when you immediately wake on Sunday morning.

Even with a good night sleep there are still many things, which can interfere with your readiness for worship.

For some, it might be an unexpected phone call or household chore that requires your attention.

For others, it may be organizing your children and getting them up and dressed in time.

As I reflect on my childhood days, I wonder if the devil's favourite time to mess with my family's readiness for worship was during the car ride to church.

Pray when you immediately wake up on Sunday morning.

The third key time for prayer is when you first arrive at church.

I know that some of you do this. You sit in your pew and the first thing you do is pray. Keep this up.

It doesn't have to be in your pew—it can be in the walk from your car to the sanctuary.

This time for prayer is important—especially if you had one of those car rides that I've just spoken about.

Continue to pray that God would prepare and ready your heart to worship Him.

The fourth key time for prayer is at the end of the service.

That may sound strange considering that I indicated that this prayer is aimed at preparing us for worship.

This fourth time slot for prayer has the week ahead in view.

We don't want to limit worship to what we do for an hour and a quarter on Sunday morning. We want to worship God throughout the day and throughout the week.

One of my biggest fears is, after walking closely with God on Sunday morning, not properly honouring my family on Sunday afternoon.

So, my encouragement then, is to use some time at the end of the service—before you get up from your seat—to pray and ask God to prepare you for the rest of the day and for the week ahead.

I cannot overemphasize the fact that true worship is a matter of the heart.

Because God is a spirit, the worship that we render to Him must be of a spiritual kind.

It is for good reason that Jesus commands us, "**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...strength and...mind**"(Lk.10:27).

The Pharisees were excellent at fulfilling their religious duties. Yet, Jesus says their worship is in vain because their heart was not in it.

We don't want what we do to be in vain.

Let's do the work of preparation.

Let's pray often for God to ready our hearts.

And then let us expect to experience the immense peace and joy that accompanies authentic worship.