

Dear Friends,

How many professing Christians of today imitate first century Jewish believers who think pleasing and serving God is all--and only--about appearance. Put on a good show and you might even impress God. Their faith is measured by pretense and show. Jesus used a word that means "Theatrical" in the Sermon on the Mount, "to be seen of men," with no approval whatever.

Our study lesson takes us to the heart of the matter. Part of the theatrical pretense of religion the Jews practiced was a strict diet. They thought they followed Moses' Law almost perfectly. They were so strict in their tithing that they literally counted the very small herb leaves they grew, one leaf for God and nine for me. Even some time after Jesus' resurrection, when the Lord showed Peter in a vision all kinds of animals with the invitation, "...kill and eat," Peter still resisted the idea of eating anything regarded in Moses as "Unclean." When the Lord showed Peter the meaning of that vision, Peter learned a lesson about diet, but he learned a far greater lesson about God's having cleansed a people out of all races, families, and cultures, not just out of the Jewish culture.

How does God regard tension and discord between believers in His family, and especially in His church? Solomon tells us.

These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren. (Proverbs 6:16-19 KJV)

All the items in this list of things that God hates deal with our interpersonal relationships, how we treat and get along with others. He reserved the greatest objection to the seventh; it was not simply something God hated, sowing discord among brothers in the family of God is an abomination to Him. In the language Jesus used in this week's study lesson, it defiles the man.

We seldom fully grasp just how fully our relationship with each other mirrors our relationship with the Lord. Develop a chip-on-the-shoulder angry attitude toward your brothers and sisters in the faith, and you likely--almost certainly--have a similar attitude toward God. Grow a caring, selfless attitude toward your faith family, and you just as surely have that kind of healthy relationship with the Lord.

Knowing this reality from Jesus' own words provides the strongest imaginable motive for us to guard our words and attitudes toward each other, to treat each other with grace and respect, and to manifest those traits in our words to them. Can we now understand why Jesus opened this parable with "Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand"? The question of the day for the family of faith today is not how I may manipulate you to my advantage, but how I may serve you, for in serving you I find my only meaningful way to serve Jesus. How may I serve you?

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

What Defiles a Man?

And when he had called all the people unto him, he said unto them, Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man. If any man have ears to

hear, let him hear. And when he was entered into the house from the people, his disciples asked him concerning the parable. (Mark 7:14-17 KJV 1900)

And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man. (Mark 7:20-23 KJV 1900)

If we relied on our perception, we might well overlook this lesson as a parable. It is much more direct and obvious than most parables. But it is so instructive and needful for the Lord's people today no less than when Jesus spoke the words. Unlike the other parables, He introduced the parable with "*Hearken unto me every one of you.*" Many of the parables Jesus framed to display His righteous judgment against the religious leaders of Judaism who witnessed His life and miracles but rejected Him as their Messiah. In this parable, Jesus tells us in the beginning that we all need to ponder this parable.

For sake of space, I omitted three verses, but do not overlook the words.

And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him. (Mark 7:18 KJV 1900)

Think of all the sincere professing Christians in our day who believe that diet, what they eat, either sanctifies or defiles them before God. Jesus taught otherwise. Scripture teaches moderation in diet and in other lifestyle choices we make, but here He emphasizes that our choices of food do not defile us or sanctify us with Him. What exits the mouth, our words, not the food that goes in it, He reminds us, causes our sin problems toward Him and toward other believers. How so? He explained the point.

The corruption and sin that resides within us stews and festers, if allowed to do so. It appears in the words we say. It often manifests itself in our sinful judgments against other believers. "You know the only reason he said that is...." "If I had done what he did, I'd have done a better job." And how do we know what resides in his mind when Scripture warns that we can't fully know what resides in our own heart?

We occasionally quote one verse from an Old Testament lesson dealing with the corruption of our hearts. That verse summarizes a broader lesson. Here are two additional verses from that context.

Thus saith the LORD; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD. (Jeremiah 17:5 KJV)

Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is. (Jeremiah 17:7 KJV)

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9 KJV)

How does our heart deceive us? It turns our trust away from God and His reliable testimony in Scripture to the words and ideas of another human. We cannot trust “Flesh,” another person, and trust the Lord. This lesson does not promote paranoia or destructive distrust. It focuses our minds where we need to keep them for important moral and lifestyle choices, trust in God alone. When I open the door to trust a man whose ideas and words cause me to distance myself from other believers and from the Lord, de facto I also distance myself from the Lord, the point of Verse 5.

We need never question or doubt God and His word in Scripture.

The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. (Psalm 12:6 KJV)

God always reveals Himself and His faithful promises in Scripture. Can we say the same about any human? And Jeremiah responds, no. I look back over a lifetime of experience in my faith walk and ministry. On occasion, despite the testimony of Scripture and conscience, I trusted a human whom I believed to be trustworthy. Surely, he/she knew more about Scripture than I. And on every such occasion, I lived to profoundly regret my choice. God in Scripture always speaks only truth. That is the assuring point of Verse 7, “**Blessed** is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is.”

What then is the lesson we should learn from Verse nine? When our heart deceives us into thinking we can trust a human **more than** we trust God and His revealed word in Scripture, we become the victim of our own heart’s deceit.

Whatever God teaches us in His Word, in Scripture alone, is always the right way for us. And any time we choose to ignore and contradict what God teaches us in His Book, we prove Jeremiah’s prophetic words in Verse Five above. And we shall suffer the “Curse” warned in that verse. We cannot deceive ourselves into avoiding this judgment.

Early in the pandemic I received an e-mail from a man who had listened to my streamed messages. He disagreed with my teaching that God and His grace alone accomplish our salvation, holding that man either causes or prevents his personal salvation. He had been well taught by his teachers. He tried to reason with me about his ideas. However, **not once** did he appeal to Scripture or even quote a Scripture. When I pointed this flaw out, he assured me that he would get back to me in a few days with supporting Scriptures for his ideas. He never got back to me. What is the value of an empty, endless argument over ideas, yours or mine? We need not speak profanity or evil words against another person to make the point Jesus taught in this parable. Promoting our spiritual and world view opinions that have no basis in Scripture, are no less “Defiling” than other sinful words. Jesus frequently spoke against that very habit of the religious leaders of Judaism who spoke their opinions with broad but empty claims of Moses’ law, but in fact their ideas contradicted God’s law given to Moses. (Matthew 15:3; following this verse Matthew

records this same parable regarding our words and ideas more defiling us than our diet or other external things)

Jesus focuses our minds on our words, what comes out of our mouth, what we say. We may affirm and validate our faith, or we may destroy our faith-credibility with others, by our words and ideas. We also either solidify the Lord's blessings on us, or we set the stage for severe chastening by those ideas and words. Jesus' warning in this lesson is as intense as any of His warnings recorded in the gospels.

This lesson does not prohibit, or even hinder, for that matter, trusting and healthy relationships with others. Scripture teaches us to seek such relationships with other godly believers. (Proverbs 11:14 KJV as one example) However, when we consider how we frame our world view and our personal ethics, our moral values, Jesus confronts us with His stern caution in the lesson. Spiritual values and ideas, as well as our moral compass, belong with Scripture and God, not with Scripture plus human opinions. In effect, when we add any human opinion to Scripture in forming our world view and moral values, we already reject Scripture and choose something other than Scripture as our basis. That is the precise reason Jesus so strongly judged and condemned the idea. How do we form those broad views of life and acceptable values? Perhaps over the last two years I've had more time to ponder and to observe. Possibly the pressures of COVID isolation and social changes related to it took some folks so by surprise that they reacted to it more with emotion and fear—or skepticism—than by faith and God. Whatever their reasons, I've observed many folks who think of themselves as devoted believers, but their present world view is shaped far more by human input than by God in Scripture. And their angry and unhappy disposition witnesses the fruit of their choice. When our joy vanishes, we need to look, long and deep, at self. This is a red flag warning to examine self, repent, and return to the Lord and His ways, not continue in our empty pursuit of human values and human opinions. Faith "Defiled" is faith overthrown. At no time in our lifetime do believers more need the Lord and a healthy vigorous faith at work in them than today. Will we choose God and His way or man and his ways? Will we choose to continue in the fruitless angry skepticism of man and his ways, or return to the Lord and the way of faith?

I was reading a book on the topic of faith and belief recently. I enjoy chasing words, their meaning and origin, and how they evolve over time. I was not a little surprised to learn that the English word "Believe" or "Belief" originated with the meaning of affection for another person. Apparently through the idea that we tend to trust and "Believe" what people whom we regard affectionately think or say, the word evolved to mean the act of believing or what we believe. The Biblical topic of belief definitely builds on this premise. We must come to know God and affectionately respect and trust His faithfulness before we truly believe Him and what He teaches us. This principle is mirror opposite the populist idea of believing first before we come to salvation, friendship, or discipleship with the Lord in our personal lives. This principle supports the Biblical teaching that a person is born again prior to believing and trusting the Lord, not the opposite idea of populist gospels. (John 5:24; 1 John 5:1 KJV) It also explains why most of the modern "Bibles" distort the KJV (Translated by a group of men who were truly scholars in the languages of Bible manuscripts) rendering of the "Faith of God" or the "Faith of Jesus." The modern editors of the Bible text give you their theological opinions, not a faithful translation by reversing the meaning of this term to our "Faith in God or in Jesus." The KJV rendering keeps our focus on the faithfulness—and believability—of God and of Jesus. The populist rendering turns the focus from God to the work of man, from our assessment of God's reliability to our own reliability. I am thankful to learn of a growing number of vigorous New Testament Greek scholars who have studied this term and come to defend and affirm the KJV reading with scholarly weight.

Where do we focus our faith? On the faithfulness and believability of man? Or on the faithfulness and believability of God? Based on our belief, what do we send forth out of our mouths? Things that praise God? Or things that defile us and our faith's witness, as well as destroy our peace and joy in our God?

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