

“This people honors me with their lips...BUT...”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Once upon a time, an old rabbi was held prisoner in a Roman prison. He was on minimal rationing of food & water daily, just enough for him to survive.

As time passed, the rabbi grew weaker & weaker. It became necessary to call in a doctor. His ‘problem’ was diagnosed as, what we call today, dehydration. Prison officials were confused. They knew what they were doing. Though the old man’s water-ration was minimal, they knew it to be adequate. So, the guards were to watch, closely, to see what he was doing with the water. Mystery solved! The guards discovered that the rabbi was using almost all the water to perform religious, ritual washings before he ate and before he prayed, resulting in little water for his own consumption.



This story helps us better appreciate today’s Gospel, which I just read to you from St. Mark. Specifically, it helps us better understand the shock and dismay Jewish leaders felt when they saw the disciples of Jesus, of all people, eating without the ritual washings or ablutions!

And it is precisely here... that makes today’s Gospel so important. Why? Because it focuses on one of the basic disputes between Jesus and the Jewish leaders!

Here’s a closer look at what’s involved in this particular dispute.

When Jews talk about the **“Law,”** they refer to one of two things: **“written”** Law or **“oral”** Law.

The older, more important of the two, is the **written** Law. It is set down in the Torah, i.e., in the 1st five books of the Old Testament. It is also called the Law of Moses or the Pentateuch. Some of these laws are concrete and specific. Others are very general, more like ‘norms,’ than laws. For a long time, Jews were content with these general norms. They applied them to their lives as they saw fit.

But...there’s that proverbial **“BUT”** again, in the 5th century **before** Jesus, there arose in Israel a group of legal experts, lawyers, if you would, called, **“scribes.”** They felt the general norms of the Torah were too vague and should be spelled out in more detail. (Could this have been the beginning of ‘Political Correctness’? One must wonder!) And so, they proceeded to spell them out.

Consequently, this gave rise to a 2nd set of laws—**oral laws** or **oral traditions**.

Now, at about the same time, there arose on the part of many Jews, the desire to imitate the ritual holiness of their priests.

For example, according to the written Law, ritual hand washing was required of all priests before they entered the temple sanctuary. The purpose was to wash away all ritual uncleanness, so as to worship God more worthily.

Gradually, the people began to imitate the priests and wash their hands before praying, too. In a **similar way**, the ritual practice of washing before meals evolved.

So, by the time Jesus came along, Jews observed these **oral laws** **(traditions)** just as minutely and faithfully as they observed the **written laws** of the Torah.

Now, the idea behind all of these observances was absolutely noble. It was to try and make religion and one’s relationship with God permeate every action of the day.

BUT...in the course of trying to accomplish this, **something tragic happened**. Slowly, religion began to degenerate into an activity of merely, performing, external rituals... emitting no real relationship with God... only these meticulous gyrations aimed at fulfilling some inane law...which had nothing to do with genuine worship or service!

To ignore such 'practices,' was considered a sin. All this legalistic ritualism was seen as highly desirable and even as sanctifying...a deplorable state of affairs! With such an 'approach' to God, one could hate someone in one's heart, but it wouldn't matter, so long as one fulfilled the rituals!

For example, **once upon a time**, a Muslim pursued an enemy to kill him. In the midst of the chase, the public call for prayer sounded. Instantly, the Muslim jumped off his horse, unrolled his prayer mat, and prayed the ritual prayers as fast as he could. Then he leaped back on his horse and continued the pursuit, and, shortly thereafter, killed his enemy!

It was precisely **this kind of 'legalism'** that Jesus opposed so vigorously.

So—**"How does any of this apply to us?"** you ask.

Well, it's about time, **I am glad you asked that question!**

All 'this' warns us that we, too—especially priests, must guard against identifying religion with performing 'external acts.'

For example, going to church, saying prayers (—incl. the rosary), reading the Bible, going to Stations & Benediction, and even giving to charity—all of which can be very good, yet, they do NOT, in and of themselves, guarantee holiness or sanctification.

The reason is obvious. We can **do** all these 'things,' **but...** for the wrong reasons! We can do all these things, **but** in an unloving way. You see, what counts is not so much **WHAT** we do, but the **LOVE** we put into the **doing** of it!

If our heart is filled with bitterness or pride,
then all the external practices in the world will **not** make us pleasing before God.

Today's Gospel invites us to ask ourselves... to what extent Isaiah's words apply to us:

"This people honors me with their lips, but... their hearts are far from me;"

In short, what counts in religion (our pathway to God) is not **WHAT** we do, but **WHY** we do it.
What counts is... **the love in our heart**: love of God and love of neighbor.

I now close with Paul's wonderful words about love.

**"If I have the gift of prophecy & inspired preaching and,
If I have faith in all its fullness...even enough to move mountains,
BUT... am without LOVE... then I am nothing at all.**

**If I give away all that I possess, piece by piece,
And if I even let them take my body away to burn it,
BUT... am without LOVE... it will do me no good—whatever!**

**Love is always patient and kind;
It is never jealous.**

**LOVE is never rude or selfish; it is never conceited or proud.
Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins,
BUT, delights in the truth.**

In short, LOVE... does not come to an end.

It is LOVE, then, that you should strive for" 1 Cor.13:2-8; 14:1

May our perfect and, therefore, unchangeable, forever-loving Father, our Abba, bless you...
the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.