

## **Religion or Relationship**

May God's peace and grace be with you all! My name is Linqing and I'm the new intern at Hope. Today is officially my third Sunday here; many of you must have seen me or met with me within the past two weeks. I'm very glad but also nervous to preach today, so let me tell you a little bit of my background.

I was born and raised in China. When I was about 12 years old, my mom became a Christian and I started to follow her to church not every Sunday, but most Sundays. I remember it was a small house church inside a market area where they sell lamps, where usually about 50 people gathered together to worship. Most of the time, the preaching was about 30-40mins (but I won't go that long today). Sometimes I would fall asleep during the preaching and at the end of service, I would wake up and we would say the Lord's Prayer together. At first, I would read the Lord's Prayer and after a while my mom asked me to remember it, which I thought it wasn't a big deal for me, although there were many strange wordings and phrases for my 12 year old brain to understand. Then I memorized it and I joined everyone else as they were saying the Lord's Prayer. But I didn't really understand what they were saying. The reason for me to memorize is just because they all recited except me. I didn't want to be the one being left out. I even didn't know the Lord's Prayer is in the Bible until I heard a pastor preached on that.

I also remembered that we would pray for our food before every single meal, and when people were praying, I would reply with Amen. Instead of praying by myself, I would ask my mom to pray for me, because I thought God would listen to her prayer. Does God listen to my prayers? I didn't know. I went to church almost every Sunday, sometimes I enjoyed the sermon, and sometimes I fell asleep. At that time, I listened to Pastors preaching and read the Bible as a wisdom book or a good story to listen to. I went to the church, saying Amen after people's prayer,

memorizing the Lord's Prayer, saying grace for the food, these routines became a part of my life, but God didn't become a part of my life. I was doing these not from my heart but from the tradition.

In today's story, Jesus called Pharisees and scribes the "hypocrites." And Jesus said to them: "this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And they abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition!" We were often taught that Pharisees and scribes are "hypocrites," we should keep a distance from them. But when I look back, I was just like them! I followed all the traditions but my heart was far from God. And even right now as I'm doing my internship, this story keeps reminding me: am I doing this to honor God from my heart or for myself, or for other people, or other reasons? And I think this is a good question for all of us to think about. As our reading today from James, "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. " When we look at the mirror everyday, the mirror is the word of God. I want to challenge everyone including myself, to ask one question: am I honoring God from my heart or for some other reasons?

We know in Israel's history, there was 70 years of exile while they were under the subjugation of other nations. They used to worship all kinds of gods, then the Lord sent prophets to warn them, but nobody believed them until one day they were conquered by other nations. After 70 years of exile, the Israelites no longer worshipped other gods, because they were afraid that the punishment would come if they disobeyed God. They were afraid that God would leave them if they didn't follow the laws. They followed the laws with fear and not love; Pharisees and scribes thought that as long as they follow these laws, God would keep on blessing them. This sometimes reminded me of a vending machine. We put money or credit card into the machine, and we choose what we want, we press the button and it will come out. Pharisees and scribes during the time of Jesus

were doing exactly the same thing. Choice one: obey God's law; outcome: abundant blessing. Choice two: disobey God's law; outcome: punishment. They believed that as long as they followed the laws, God would not get angry and God would keep blessing them. If our relationship with God is similar to buying things from the vending machine, then Jesus didn't need to come. He came was to rebuild and restore the broken relationship between God and us.

This week as we are welcoming students back to school, we are not only welcoming students back; we are also welcoming Jesus into our daily lives. I want to invite all of you, including myself, when we return home today to think deeply of our relationship with God: Did I lose the relationship with God? Am I willing to build or rebuild the relationship with God? Do I want to deepen the relationship with God? Am I honoring God from my heart or for some other reasons? Amen!