

Introduction:

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,” so the preacher of **Ecclesiastes** began his treatise on life under the sun. “Useless,” he cried. “All of life is useless.” Of course, by the time he is done, he discovered what is useful. In **Ecclesiastes 12:13**, he says, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (ESV). There are only two ultimately useful actions in life under the sun: fear God and obey God. Outside of that, everything else is useless. But what happens if we take those things and make them useless in themselves? In fact, that is exactly what Jesus warns against in **Matthew 15:8-9** as he quotes **Isaiah 29:13**. I understand there is some translational difficulty here. I also recognize Jesus seems to be quoting from the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Old Testament, which is slightly different from the Masoretic text that our Old Testaments translate in this passage. However, I can’t help but note in **Isaiah 29:13**, the word for “fear” is the same one that is in **Ecclesiastes 12:13**. In **Isaiah 29:13**, their fear is based on the commandments of men, the Septuagint from which Jesus quotes explains that this fear/worship is vain because it is based on the commands of men. In any event, Jesus is warning us against taking one of the only things that is useful, fearing God/worshipping God, and making it useless/vain. Of course, it is easy to look at everyone else and accuse them of vain worship, sometimes it is hard to examine ourselves. After all, as we’ve said before, it is hard to read the label when you are inside the bottle. In this lesson, I’d like us to step away from the microscope with which we often investigate others, and step to the mirror to examine ourselves. With that in mind, I think it might be good to examine what seem to be the keys of this vain worship described in **Matthew 15:8-9**. Let’s look at the surrounding context and see what was making their worship vain. Then we can examine ourselves and see how our own worship compares. In our next lesson, we’ll examine the flip side of this to discover victorious worship. But for now, let’s examine “Vain Worship in 5 Easy Steps.”

Discussion:

- I. Let the heart be divided from God
 - A. In **Matthew 15:8**, Jesus defines these vain worshippers as folks whose hearts are far from God. They are folks who have put their lips on autopilot, saying what they know needs to be said, but their hearts are not in alignment with what their lips are saying.
 - B. Of course, the very worst manifestation of this is idolatry. **Deuteronomy 11:13-17** demonstrates the great benefit of true worship to Israel, but explains that being deceived into going after other gods will destroy that usefulness. The issue was not merely going after other gods instead of Jehovah, but also going after other gods in addition to Jehovah. Consider God’s rebuke of Judah about their vain worship in **Jeremiah 7:8-10**. I doubt any of us have any icons in our closets or basements that we pray to. However, we need to keep in mind idolatry is not merely bowing before a statue, it is setting anything above God in our hearts. For instance, **Colossians 3:5** explains that covetousness is idolatry (some suggest this refers to that entire list of sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness). The point is if our hearts are divided from God, pursuing something in addition to Him, gathering in these assemblies to worship God or going in to our prayer closets to worship God simply won’t help us. It becomes useless.
 - C. But perhaps the sneakiest manifestation of this division is when our hearts are divided from God by making what we do to worship Him really be about ourselves.
 1. Think through the scenario in which this statement occurred. In **Matthew 15:1-6**, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and scribes because they weren’t honoring their parents properly. Instead of caring for their parents in their older years as honor demands, they were developing a loophole. They claimed the finances that would have gone to support their parents were given to God, so they were freed from that obligation. Let me ask you, who do you think that “devotion to God” was about? Was it about God? Was it about fearing/worshipping/honoring Him? Or was it about the people who wanted to keep their money instead of using it to care for their parents?
 2. If we are not careful, we will find our approach to worship is similar. Do we worship in order to garner some favor from God? “I will worship you God, as long as you get me a good job, put me in a nice house, let me drive nice cars.” Is that about God or us? Another way to do this is to make our worship about what we get out of it, this can lead to an entertainment concept of worship. I think of **Ezekiel 33:30-33**. Here

were people gathering to hear the prophet of God teach them God's will. But they weren't gathering to be changed, they were gathering to be entertained, listening to him merely as an after dinner speaker the way they might listen to singer or a musician.

- D. The greatest commandment is love God with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind (**Matthew 22:37**). If we want to make our worship vain, let something else creep in and divide our heart away from God.

II. Define worship by the outward actions

- A. According to Jesus, they honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him (**Matthew 15:8**). We hear this and proclaim, "That means they aren't really worshiping at all." That is true, and yet God uses the term "worship" here because that is what the people are calling it. God doesn't mean what they are doing is a kind of worship, He simply means it is what the people are calling worship. And what are they calling worship? Their external actions.
- B. I'd like to get us to think about ourselves for a moment and a concern I have. Ever since I became a Christian as a teenager, I've heard sermons about the "5 acts of worship." As I grew in Christ and began to preach, I used that systemization myself. I have no doubt when someone coined that idea and it caught on, there was a real and necessary reason to make that delineation. I'm sure they were trying to explain what a group of assembled Christians were authorized to do. However, I fear over time, there has been an unexpected and detrimental consequence from that definition.
- C. Sadly, in many conversations I've had with people, it has become painfully obvious too many Christians think the actions themselves are what equals worship. When we make that shift, believing worship equals going through a set of actions, we find ourselves on the cusp of vain worship. Walking a path that makes what we do absolutely useless. Consider again the example of the Jews in **Jeremiah 7:1-4**. They were trusting in the fact that they were conducting their worship at the Lord's temple. But God said what they were doing was useless. I fear there are some Christians who are crying out, "But it's the 5 acts of worship, the 5 acts of worship, the 5 acts of worship" and their 5 acts are just as useless for them as the Jews going to the temple was in **Jeremiah 7**. Defining worship by the external actions is a step toward vain worship.

III. Develop a systemization seen as equivalent to God's Word

- A. According to **Matthew 15:9**, the worship Jesus was warning against was based on the commandments and precepts of men. This harkens back to the situation Jesus was commenting about. The Pharisees and scribes had come up with their tradition of devoting to God what should have been devoted to their parents' care. They developed a systemization that became more important to them than God's Word.
- B. I know "we" are opposed to developing systems. We rebuke other churches and their systemizations. We of course would never systemize things like 5 acts of worship, 5 steps of salvation, 3 works of the local church, 3 means of biblical authorization. Oh wait. We should take care lest we hang ourselves on our own gallows.
- C. I bring this up because I have no doubt some who are listening to this sermon are feeling a little queasy because I've even questioned the validity of our systemization of "5 acts of worship." Yet few have taken the time to notice there is no single passage outlining these 5 acts as the acts of our worship. You can't find a single passage that says, "When the local church gathers to worship, they are the actions that are worship." Further, of the 5 acts, we can't even find passages that call them individually worship except prayer (cf. **Luke 2:37**). By extension, that could apply to our singing, when our singing is simply praying praise to God.
- D. I've witnessed Christians fight tooth and toenail (I've done so in the past) to defend our systemization that was developed by men in the face of this biblical evidence and it concerns me. When we are willing to defend our systemizations above the Word of God, we are dangerously close to vain worship.
- E. BTW: please do not misunderstand. I believe there are certain actions God has authorized to be engaged in by the assembly of the local congregation. And those 5 actions are among them. I'm simply suggesting we need to take care and be very cautious when we define worship by the outward actions and then defend a systemization man developed as if it is equivalent to the Word of God.

IV. Let those actions of worship justify breaking God's commands

- A. Now we are getting to the heart of the matter. When the heart is divided from God, worship is defined by the outward actions, and we are defending a man-made systemization above the Word of God, the next step is breaking God's commands. How could the Pharisees and scribes justify breaking the command to honor their father and mother? It was easy once they misdefined devoting part of their money to God as worship, it was easy to see that as justification to not honor their parents.
- B. Go back again to **Jeremiah 7:5-10**. What had these Judeans done? They believed because they came and went through the rituals of the temple, they were allowed to steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely,

make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods. That is, they were violating one after the other of their 10 Commandments. And they thought they were going to be delivered because they were going through the right worship motions in the right place.

- C. Can we end up guilty of that exact same thing? I once heard a brother in Texas, a gospel preacher in fact, explain how he justified the pervasive sexual immorality he had been involved in. He had been a renowned defender of “conservative” Christianity, the pattern for worship and church work, and strict morals. He preached hard against drinking, dancing, cheerleading, skimpy dress, etc. But all the while he was visiting strip clubs, frequenting prostitutes, and carrying on illicit relationships. After he was caught, he explained to my good brother and fellow worker in the gospel, Max Dawson, that he justified his behavior in this way: he had his day self and his night self. The day self was an ardent defender of true worship and morality. The night self was trapped in sin. He despised the night self, but justified it, thinking his day self made up for the night self. This is an extreme case, no doubt, but can we not find ourselves guilty of this same problem in these or lesser ways?
 - D. Do we look the other way at our gossip, lies, cheating, lusting, pornography, pride, etc. thinking that we can’t be all that bad? Do we make excuses for not spending time in personal prayer, Bible study, evangelism, etc. claiming that at least we “worship” the right way? After all, at least we are worshipping in the right building and going through the right actions. Do we ever find ourselves mirroring the Pharisee of **Luke 18:9-14**, looking down on the tax collector because there are some rituals and motions he doesn’t go through all the while steeped in our own sinful self-righteousness? When we think our right rituals qualify as worthy worship and makes up for breaking God’s other commands, our worship has become useless. After all, do you remember what the two useful things were? Fearing God and obeying God. If we are not careful, we will find in one fell swoop we wipe both of those out.
- V. Don’t let your heart be changed by your worship
- A. And all of this culminates in unchanged hearts. After Jesus rebuked the Pharisees, He called the crowds to Him and explained that this fear of eating with unwashed hands was baseless because what went into the mouth didn’t defile people. As all this played out, Jesus explained that what mattered is what goes in to the heart. The heart determines how a person behaves (**Matthew 15:10-20**).
 - B. The purpose of worship is, of course, to proclaim God is worthy. However, we need to understand God has us worship not because He needs us to stroke His ego. He has us worship because we need to worship. We need what that kind of surrendering humility provides us. We need the changes it brings. We need to worship in order to change our hearts. Consider **Psalms 73**. In the first half of the psalm, the psalmist is ready to abandon God. However, in the last half, he honors God and wants to be devoted to him. What was the shift? In **Psalms 73:16-17**, he went to the sanctuary of God. He went to worship God. In worship, he was changed.
 - C. If what you want is vain worship, go through some ritualistic motions that you defend on par with God’s Word, allowing them to justify your sins, and make sure you never, never, never allow worship to impact your heart. Just let it be a check list of actions that you think make up for everything else you do.
 - D. Congratulations! You have taken the only things that are useful in this useless world and destroyed them. You have accomplished vain worship in 5 easy steps.

Conclusion:

Worship matters. Trust me, you don’t want worship in vain. If you do, you’ve just made everything in your life completely and 100% useless. Don’t let worship merely be about rote actions. Let your heart be changed by your worship. Let your worship really be useful and victorious.