

“Doers of the Word”

James 1:17-27

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Each of the scripture passages you heard this morning merit some comment. I’m going to focus mostly on the reading from James, but I also need to say a few words about the other three passages.

First: the passage from the Song of Solomon, also called the Song of Songs. This is just one little snippet out of eight whole passages of love poetry. This book contains some of the most sensual imagery in the entire Bible; it contains a number of scenes featuring a man and a woman who enjoy looking at, and touching, one another’s bodies. At times the book is practically erotic. It’s a curious book to find in the Bible; it is, on the one hand, a celebration of human love. On the other hand, there is a long tradition in the Christian tradition of interpreting the book allegorically; in that reading, the book is a symbolic representation of the relationship between Christ and the Church. That relationship is joyous and generous; Christ gave his life for the Church, and the Church continually gives itself to Christ. In that interpretation, the passage we heard this morning is about Christ beckoning the Church to come away with him. “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away!” Leave your worldly cares behind, and follow the voice of your Savior! This is the one and only passage from the Song of Songs in the entire three-year lectionary cycle, so it will be quite a while before we come back to this love poetry again!

Next: Psalm 45. In its original context, this psalm would have been about one of the kings of ancient Israel, perhaps King Solomon. Indeed, the heading for the psalm indicates that the occasion was a “royal wedding;” the king was getting married! The heading also says it is a “love song.” If we read the psalm that way, it’s mildly interesting, but hardly illuminating. I mean, who really cares about a wedding that happened some three thousand years ago? But this psalm, like the passage from the Song of Solomon, also has a long history in the Christian Church of being interpreted allegorically. The king is not just an earthly king; the king is none other than Jesus Christ. Who is the king marrying? Why, the Church, of course. So in that reading, this psalm is about the formal establishment of the enduring relationship *that still exists today* between Jesus and his followers. *We* are in this psalm, as members of Christ’s Church, united to Jesus through the vows we have made to him. “My heart is stirring with a noble song” – those are *our* voices; that is *our* heart. Suddenly this psalm takes on a whole new meaning. “You are the noblest among the people ... grace flows from your lips, because God has blessed you forever ... your throne, O God, endures forever and ever ... you love righteousness and hate iniquity ... all your garments are fragrant with myrrh” ... and so on. Indeed, some Christian traditions would even say that the reference to the “queen” standing at the king’s right side is none other than Mary, the mother of Jesus. “On your right hand is the queen, adorned with the gold of Ophir.” Remember that scene near the end of the gospels, when Jesus is dying on the cross, and Mary, his mother, is standing nearby, watching? Here she is again, standing by Christ’s side, as he weds his bride, the Church.

So let your imagination run away with you. Both of those passages are about Jesus – *and us!*

Turning now to the New Testament, let's first take a look at the Gospel passage. This is a curious passage that seems, at first glance, to be about hand-washing. We've all heard a *lot* about hand-washing over the course of the past seventeen months! Does it surprise you to learn that Jesus and his disciples were *not* in the habit of washing their hands before they ate a meal? But the Pharisees, Jesus' opponents, *did* wash their hands. There was not a specific law in the Old Testament that *required* the washing of hands before a meal, but the Pharisees also observed a large number of traditions that were *expansions* of the written law. Washing hands before a meal was one of those. That was not because of a concern for *cleanliness* – they knew nothing about germs. It was more a matter of *ritual*, one of many rituals that the Pharisees observed that they considered to be “the tradition of the elders.” When Jesus is challenged about this, his point is that it's not *dirt* that we need to be most concerned about. There are many things that God cares about far more than the observance of human rituals. We'll come back to some of those specifics in a few minutes. But basically what Jesus is saying is that our *morals* – or lack thereof – are of *far* more concern to God than our observation of man-made traditions and rituals.

And that brings us to the reading from the epistle of James, which, in its own way, makes a similar point. Now this book is a fairly short little book near the end of your Bible, written – according to Christian tradition – by James, the brother of Jesus. (Technically speaking, the *half*-brother of Jesus.) He was, in the early church, the leader of the congregation in Jerusalem. James wrote this little letter “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” that is, to Jews who had become Christians. The purpose of the letter was to give those Jewish Christians some general instruction about Christian faith and life.

Martin Luther, the famous Protestant reformer, was not a big fan of this letter. He felt that it was lacking in theological depth. But James's point is that theology ought to express itself in *action*. James says that God “gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” He's talking about how we become Christians through the hearing of the gospel, and how there's a *point* to that: God *sets us apart* from the rest of humanity, like the way Israelites set apart the first part of their harvest and give it to God, like the way we set apart the first part of our income and give it to God. “So that we would become a kind of *first fruits* of his creatures.” We are called to *be set apart* from the rest of the human race. “You must understand this!” he says emphatically. And then he launches into a long sequence of things that we are called to *do differently* than the rest of humanity.

First: “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.” Here is a message for our time! *Quick to listen* – that hardly describes our culture; people interrupt and talk over one another all the time. Real *listening* is a rare commodity today, especially when people disagree. “Slow to speak, slow to anger” – my gosh, there is *so much* anger out there; so many people eager to share their anger with the world. But “your anger does not produce God's righteousness.” There's a big difference between being *angry* ... and being *holy*.

Second: “Rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness.” There is a *whole lot* we need to rid ourselves of. If you want a list, well, there's a really good list, straight from the mouth of Jesus, in the Gospel passage: “fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.” Basically, everything that is wrong with the world is right there, in that one line. If every single one of us would truly work to rid ourselves of all that “sordidness” and “wickedness,” to use James' words, we would be *stellar* examples of humanity. But there is still *way* too much of all this in the church today. Which one of those do *you* most need to address, in *your* life?

Third: “Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” James is talking here about the Word of *God*, the word that gets freshly implanted in us every time we come to worship, or open up our Bible at home. That Word is what leads to our *salvation!*

Fourth: “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” Here is the crux of the matter. To actually strive to *live* the way Jesus calls us to live. Anybody can come to church. Anybody can sit in the pews and passively listen to what me or anybody else has to say. The question is, are we actually going to *implement* what we are *hearing*, in *our own life*? Are we going to allow it to *shape* and *change* our heart, our actions, our interactions with other people, the way we spend our time and money? Don’t just *pretend* to be a Christian, says James. *Be one, in reality!*

James elaborates: “For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.” He’s saying, when we leave this place, *do not forget* who we are called to be, and what we are called to do. “Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty” – that is, those who actually *listen* to what Jesus has to say – “and persevere” – that is, making a *concerted effort* to really *do* what Jesus asks of us – “being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.” To give an example: “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.” That is, if we come to church, and hear the Gospel message, but then we go home and just talk and live like anybody else, and don’t make any effort to actually *conform* our life to the will of God, then we might as well not have come here at all. Don’t bother calling yourself “religious” if you’re not really going to try to *live* your religion in your daily life.

Finally: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” You want to know what Christianity is all about? Here it is, distilled down to its basic essence. It consists of two key elements. “To care for orphans and widows in their distress.” That is, to extend our arms in love to our fellow men and women. What are you doing that is providing *meaningful* and *tangible help* to other people? What positive *difference* or *impact* are you having in other people’s lives? *That’s* what Christianity is about. The *horizontal* dimension of sharing God’s love. *Loving your neighbor*. Like, *for real*.

But ... that’s not all. It’s not *just* about giving, not *just* about helping, not *just* about loving. It’s also about this: “to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Here is the *vertical* dimension. *Loving God*. This is the personal spiritual journey *we* are on, to become more like Jesus, to better embody his morals and his values with each new day. There are all sorts of temptations and corruptions in this world, eager to bring us down to their sordid level. All those things in that list from the mouth of Jesus, that we looked at a couple minutes ago. *One* of the goals of the Christian life is to help other people. But the *other* key goal is to *grow* in our own personal commitment, our own personal integrity, our own personal *discipleship*, our own ability to say “no” to the ways of sin and to say “yes” to the ways of God.

This is not an “either/or.” It is not the case that we can *choose* between these two aspects of the Christian life. We can’t choose to *just* help other people. Nor can we choose to *just* work on our own personal spiritual development. We have to be doing *both*, at the same time. Extending our loving arms, *and* growing in our personal holiness. Loving God *and* loving neighbor – *both* at the same time.

We’re going to come back to this letter for several more weeks. There’s a *lot* more here....

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