

Title: A Call to Heartfelt Faith that is Pure and Undefined

Subtitle: Devotions that contribute to a transformed heart

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/w9jwpHdSIA4>

In our opening Collect of the Day, we prayed for God to “*increase in us true religion.*”¹ Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines religion as “a particular system of faith and worship.” It seems that every religious system has spoken and unspoken rules and spiritual disciplines that people live by. In today’s Gospel, we encounter a man-made religious system of rules that was developed with good intentions but ended up being burdensome and misleading.

The Pharisees that Jesus encountered had religious zeal, and the God they endeavored to worship was the true and living God, but their man-made rules ended up missing the goal of worshipping him in Spirit and in truth. Therefore, in loving compassion, Jesus strove and argued with them because their form of religion, if not corrected, would leave them cold and heartless.

Timothy Kelly, a modern-day apologist, explains that “The problem that most people have as we read these stories is to say, “Well, this is not very relevant for us today. It’s a purely antiquarian interest. Who cares about the clean and the unclean laws, the ceremonial washings, and the ablutions the Jews observed? Who cares about that sort of thing?” But Jesus never picked a fight unnecessarily.”²

Therefore, this story has applications for us when we realize that what the Pharisees did with their faith is something that is a human tendency for all expressions of religion, including those with orthodox beliefs. We can go through the right motions, kneel, stand, and say memorized prayers, and do those things by such habit that we don’t even think about their meaning.

Our Old Testament lesson gives us a warning about this tendency when Moses wrote, “***You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging***

¹ BCP, p. 233, Collect for Proper 17, The Sunday closest to August 31st

² Timothy Keller, from a sermon entitled, “Lessons in Drawing Near”—February 16, 1997

you.”³ The law that Israel was given placed restrictions on the chosen people, some of which were sanitary in their nature. The priests, for example, had to wash their hands before going into the temple. Nobody else was given that command. But the teachers of the law said, “Well if the priests have to do it, wouldn’t it be safe for us all to do it?” Then, in time, they went beyond that. “If you have to wash your hands before going into God’s presence at the tabernacle, wouldn’t it be safe if we always washed our hands before we ever prayed?” As time went on, they “fenced”⁴ the whole law with elaborate rules and precautions against accidental transgressions. Then in time, their tradition of keeping these humanly manufactured laws became more important than the law itself.

When Jesus challenged this system of rules, he was not thinking of the letter of a precept but of the Spirit and the tendency of their rule-keeping. To this, he prophetically applied Isaiah’s words, ***“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”***⁵ Thus, ***“You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition.”***⁶

Now, let’s take a moment and ask, “What does this have to do with you and me?” Every religion, including our own, has some system of rules by which we live. Our particular church has collected policies and procedures that are useful and applicable to all kinds of things. Recently, our church has spent a great deal of time wrestling with the right course of action when it comes to keeping people safe during this COVID19 pandemic and its variant. Consequently, priests and laity have handwashing policies that are in place. But the end result of these rules should always beg the question: “Do such rules help us or hinder us in our goal to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength?”

³ Deuteronomy 4:2

⁴ In the Jewish faith these rules based on the Talmud are called the halacha (which literally means “The way to go” or “Way to Walk.” Its intent is to erect a fence around the law to prevent transgressions.

⁵ Mark 7:6-7 which was a quote from Isaiah 29:13

⁶ Mark 7:9

And does it result in loving our neighbor as ourselves? Our presiding bishop has said that putting on a mask or washing our hands are small things that we can do to keep each other safe, and doing so is a practical expression of love. But the issues Jesus covers much, much more.

The Prayer Book that we use is a marvelous expression of orthodox faith. But it, too, can be used thoughtlessly. Even something as beautiful and meaningful as the Lord's Prayer can be misused if it merely rattled off without a thought for what it means.

The original objective of the law, given by Moses, with all of its demands, pointed to two basic things. Namely, the sinfulness of the human heart, out of which proceeds all forms of evil, and secondly, the need for an inner cleansing from these sins, which would eventually come through a Savior and Redeemer.

A fellow colleague, William H. Willimon, in one of his sermons, declared:

“Some of us are conditioned to think that the way to do something about the evil in the world is exclusively through legislative action, political change, or systemic solutions. But this week's Gospel suggests that the evil we find in the world starts with us. If we are serious about transforming the world's evil, we need to begin personally, in admission and confrontation with our own evil.”⁷

G. K. Chesterton, an English writer, philosopher, lay theologian, was once asked by a London magazine to contribute to an issue of the magazine that was devoted to the theme, “What's wrong with the world?” Chesterton replied with a two-sentence contribution, “What's wrong with the world? Me.”⁸ And what are we going to do about that perplexing problem? How can we fix what's wrong inside our hearts? We can begin by listening to Jesus and take to heart what he said about repentance and faith.

⁷ Sermon by William H. Willimon @2021 located at *A Sermon for Every Sunday*

⁸ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7014283.G_K_Chesterton

St. Augustine defined the Christian life as long-term training in desiring the right things in the right way for the right reasons. James speaks about the perfect law that brings liberty in our New Testament lesson today as he told his audience to be ***“doers of the word and not hearers only.”***⁹ James goes on to say, ***“God chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we would be a kind of firstfruits of His creation.”***¹⁰

He was saying that true faith brings forth fruit and that fruit empowers us to love God and our neighbor. If true faith is meant to bring liberty, then what does religion look like that brings only a form of godliness but denies its power?

One example that comes to mind occurred when as a hospice chaplain. I encountered a woman who had been married four times. Because her particular faith told her that divorce and remarriage were wrong and was a grave sin, she wrongly believed that her marriage status disqualified her from ever going to church and receiving the forgiveness of sins. When I heard her story, I realized that her circumstances as a child were tragic. Then, when she got married at the age of sixteen as a way to get out of an abusive situation, she soon discovered that her new husband was also abusive. Then things went from bad to worse, with two more broken marriages by the age of 24. But her final and 4th marriage at age 27 lasted until her husband died over fifty years later. In her situation, the canon law of the church only brought condemnation. If we view the law only as something that reveals sin, we miss an important element of its purpose, namely that we need a Savior. In this women’s case, the intent of that law was designed to uphold the sanctity of marriage, but a bigger law of love exists, which offers full and free forgiveness when we don’t meet the law’s demands.

⁹ James 1:22

¹⁰ James 1:18

That is why Jesus came. That is why we needed a Savior. Paul tells us, ***“where sin abounds, grace much more abounds.”***¹¹

In this same Spirit, James exhorts us to ***“humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.”***¹² The “implanted Word” is the Gospel which is nothing less than good news for fallen sinners like you and me. The Gospel is not a set of rules to outwardly follow, but it is meant to work in us and change us deep within. It leads to a changed life. The effects of the Gospel should result in a continual process of inward transformation and then outward action that honors God. God’s word frees us to live in truth, and his Spirit gives us the power to live it out. James ends our lesson today with this, ***“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”***¹³

So let’s continue to “Bring forth in us the fruit of good works, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”¹⁴ Amen.

Reflection Questions

- What is the true purpose of Christian devotion?
- What devotional practices do you endeavor to keep? How do those practices contribute to a living, healthy, compassionate faith that results in a changed heart?
- How has God helped you “hear” his word recently and then obey it?

¹¹ Romans 5:20

¹² James 1:21

¹³ James 1:27

¹⁴ BCP p. 233, Collect for Proper 17