

## **JAMES 1:17-27**

<sup>17</sup>Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup>In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

<sup>19</sup>You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup>for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. <sup>21</sup>Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

<sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup>But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

<sup>26</sup>If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>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.

## **MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

<sup>1</sup>Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>2</sup>they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup>(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) <sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" <sup>6</sup>He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; <sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' <sup>8</sup>You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

<sup>14</sup>Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile."

<sup>21</sup>"For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup>adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

## **Heart Troubles**

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When I was a teenager my mother and I had an ongoing struggle over that age-old saying, which I'm sure your mother must have uttered on occasion, which was, "What will the neighbors think?" You can't wear that to school! What will they think of your parents? I can't let you go outside in that. No, you can't go to that party. People will think I'm the worst mother on the planet!" It didn't help that our next door neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. French, were members of the Baptist church where we attended. My mother thought Jan French was a saint and her children were perfect. They weren't, but she thought so. I found her position to be somewhat hypocritical and more religious than loving. I kid her about it now but I was troubled by it then.

Sadly, I can remember inflicting the same kinds of judgment on my own children. We just don't seem to be able to stop ourselves and I'm as guilty as anyone. We worry about what people think of us, don't we? We conform ourselves to the world's standards sometimes and it doesn't always serve us and certainly doesn't reflect what God sees or desires for our lives. These struggles of the heart are part of living and loving and sometimes we just get it wrong. I know I do. I often judge others by what I see on the outside. By their clothes or by their hairstyle and color. By what kind of music they listen to, and how loudly they listen to it. I judge them by the ideas they post on Facebook or their political views. I judge them on their religious ideas and

theology. And, like the Pharisees, my heart is often far from God and I don't allow myself to truly see others as sisters and brothers.

I remember seeing a video clip that really challenged me about how we see others. It was done as an experiment to see how people would respond to someone who needed help based on the way they were dressed. The first clip shows a well-dressed businessman on crutches trying to walk through a busy downtown area. He is carrying his briefcase and after taking a few steps he falls down with crutches and briefcase going everywhere. Every time he falls people around him immediately stop to help him up, and make sure he is alright. It is good to see others so willing to help. Very encouraging.

The last half of the experiment involves someone who appears to be homeless. He has long hair and shabby clothes, a bucket with his sleeping bag and a backpack of some sort. Every time he falls down the people around him seem to veer wide and go around him without ever offering to help. Several times he just lay there on the sidewalk, and even then no one came to his aid. It was like he was invisible. The last time he falls down he is near another homeless person who, guess what is the first one to come to his aid.

It reminds me of that verse from 1 Samuel 16: 7 where God says to him, "for the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

I think that may be what Jesus is talking about today when he reminds the Pharisees, that they missed it. That God does care about ritual purity, but what God cares more about, is what's in your heart. And will what is in your heart lead you to do holy actions or will it just cause you to exclude or judge others? Or even worse, ignore those around you who are in need? This is what James is saying as well. He was Jesus' brother, by the way, so he ought to know.

Jesus and the disciples have just come from the marketplace where people from all over the place have brought those who need healing. I'll bet some of them are looking pretty shabby and might be smelling kind of ripe; with all kinds of ailments and covered with dust from the road.

I imagine Jesus and the disciples had touched and comforted and healed as many as they could and are now taking a break or maybe even getting ready to have lunch, when those old Pharisees show up to say, "Ah, wait a minute. Aren't you forgetting something? Aren't you going to purify yourselves after touching all those sick people before you put that date in your mouth? What will the neighbors think? (Is my mother here?)

I can hear Jesus' wheels turning, "You're kidding, right? This is what you are worried about?" Washing your hands so you will look purified? So you will somehow be separate and holier than thou? What is it with you guys?

One of my favorite Comedians is Jeff Foxworthy who has made a career of telling "redneck" jokes. Some favorites are, "You might be a redneck if someone asks you for some identification and you show them your belt buckle." You might be a redneck if you ever cut your grass and found a car. You might be a redneck if your wife has ever said, "Come move this transmission so I can take a bath." A clever pastor used this same format to talk about being a Pharisee by saying, "You might be a Pharisee if you've ever shouted, "Amen!" more than 51 times during a single sermon on somebody else's sin. You might be a Pharisee if you think the only music God listens to is at least 100 years old ... if you're sure nobody has ever had to forgive you ... if your black leather Thompson Chain-Reference Bible is so big it takes two hands to hold it up. You might be a Pharisee if you think the world would be a better place if everyone were just like you ... if you think Jesus might have overstepped his bounds when he turned water into wine ... if you think big hair is a sign of holiness ... if you go to church to prove you're good!"

Now its pretty clear the Pharisees are having some heart troubles today. It's not entirely their fault. It has been ingrained in them for generations that this is the way to honor God. That keeping these rules and regulations is what God wants and it is their mission to see that everyone keeps them. I get that. We aren't so different when it comes to that, I guess. Having folks remind us of the appropriate ways to do things is important.

But Jesus has come to let everyone know that God cares about what is in your heart more than what you put in your mouth or if you wash your hands correctly. That the true temple of God resides inside you, a place that is holy and pure, a place where God has already placed his own heart, his own word, his own spirit. We hear it often in the scriptures where God says, "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." This is what James is saying as well when he talks about the, "implanted word of God that is within in you that has the power to save your souls." And, isn't that Good News? That it isn't about keeping traditions or religious rules but about letting the love of God come forth from within you. That yes, we could choose to be vulgar and hateful and unforgiving but if we let God fill our hearts, then perhaps, just maybe, words and thoughts that are loving will come out first. And even better I think, is knowing that when God looks upon you it is with love and not judgment. God sees the world and his children much differently than we do and we should be very thankful for that! I know I am.

I had an experience a couple weeks ago that reminded me of this very thing. I hadn't planned on buying a table when I left the house that morning. It was not even on the radar as far as that goes. But when I arrived in the parking lot where we were doing some ministry event, there it was sitting on the back of her pickup truck. It was face down with the legs sticking up in the air as if it were hiding its face in the bed of the truck. The lady asked if anyone wanted to look at the table she had and so, just to be polite, I said, "yeah sure." The legs and base of the table were about all you could see of it, and it looked fairly sturdy. It was obviously handmade by someone who generally knew what they were doing. 'Handsome' is all one could say about it at first glance. I asked her what she wanted for it. She said 10 dollars. I knew she needed the money, so I gave her \$20 and we loaded it onto my truck.

The table was still face down and I had no idea what it really looked like. Like I said, I didn't need a table, I just bought it because she obviously needed the cash. I kept wondering all the way home, "how was I going to explain this one to my wife?" We are trying to downsize not add more useless stuff to our house. I guess I could just donate it to the Habitat Re-Store if I couldn't find a use for it.

It was after I got it home and unloaded it that I began to see that there was more to the table than I originally thought. Once I turned it over and got a look at the top, which I'll tell you, had seen some wear. I could see that underneath all those stains and dirt, was something worth getting a closer look at. I figured the least I could do was clean it up a bit and give it a chance. I spent a few hours sanding and scraping. It was hard work but well worth the effort. It turns out that the entire table is made of wormy maple. It has these beautiful markings and patterns that were all but hidden beneath the wear and tear. I couldn't imagine why someone would let it go, let alone not care for it, but that's how it goes sometimes. It is a gorgeous piece of furniture which may become my new desk. Might be the best 20 bucks I ever spent.

And the whole process caused me to consider that God may see us the same way. We are often hard worn, scratched up by the world and living, covered with stains and flaws, hiding our faces from others in our own truck beds of shame. We don't always have the chance to wash up. Worried how the world will judge us, or not see us for who we are. Choosing to see only the color of our skin, the quality of our clothes, the way we speak, the way we live and love, the way we worship. But God knows that underneath all of that stuff...there is something beautiful. He doesn't need to get out his sander or scraper to know that either. God sees that you are beautiful, unique, and perfect, just the way you are. You may need to be polished up a bit, but I suspect not too

much. God takes care of that part. God loves you just as you are regardless of how others see you. For me, and I hope for you as well, this is what the Good News is all about. That as we abide in Christ we are complete and whole, restored, forgiven, made like new, each and every day. We are washed clean in his love.

So, I guess like the Pharisees and those who think of themselves as religious, we need to not just look on the surface, but look to the heart. To truly see others as children of God who carry within them the same promise and hope that is within you; all for Christ's sake.

And this morning we will come to this table. A table of love that has been prepared for you long before you were even aware of God's incredible love. A table where all will find welcome and acceptance. This is no junkyard table or secondhand table, it doesn't need to be sanded or restored for it is restoration itself! So, don't worry about washing your hands or anything else for that matter. There's a place reserved just for you! Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.