

Being Doers of the Word

James 1:17-27 and Mark 7:1-8, 1-15, 21-23 James 1:22 Key vs.

Several decades ago, religious columnist Mike McManus wrestled with the paradox that America was the world's most religious nation, but the least ethical. He noted that religion was gaining ground, but morality was losing ground. He based this on the number of people who claimed to be attending a weekly religious service, yet our nation at that time had the world's highest rates of crime, teen pregnancy and divorce, as well as high number of folks who said they would lie to achieve a business aim. Well, that was several decades ago, and I wonder what the outcome of such research would reveal today.

What is it about American spirituality or "religiosity" that seems to be losing the connection between what we say we believe and how we live our lives? Our faith was never meant to be compartmentalized. We were never meant to just go through the motions on Sunday, and then forget all that we had learned, all that we had committed ourselves to, and resolved to change when we go back to work or school the next day. Also, I think it's actually possible to throw yourself into religious activities and lose the focus of what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, which naturally leads us into service and ministry. The difference is one of attitude and motivation.

A good case in point is the Pharisees and Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' day. The Pharisees were good at going through all the religious motions and rituals. And they expected everyone else to do the same or they were not considered holy. Now, there's nothing wrong with using religious symbols or rituals. If used the right way, in the right attitude, a symbol or ritual can convey deep spiritual passion and truth. The religious rite of handwashing, for example, originated with God's instruction that priests had to wash their hands and feet before entering the tabernacle. Behind the ceremonial act lay a truth- that clean hands and feet represented a pure heart without which no one enters the presence of God.

But for the Pharisees, the meaningful symbol of handwashing became ritualized as a required spiritual exercise. The priestly rite of handwashing was extended to be mandated for all the people of Israel. Tradition weighed down a simple ceremony with burdensome, bureaucratic details that eventually encompassed the whole of life. Handwashing became so precisely defined that the amount of water, the posture of the hands, and even the direction of the flowing water were all strictly regulated. So cleansing and spirituality came to depend upon perfectionistic attention to details.

Finally, because the inner attitude and motivation of the heart was ignored, the rite itself substituted for the spiritual experience that it originally represented. Performing the ritual accurately and at the right times became more important than a person's purity of heart. That's like baptizing someone in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit without bothering to ask if the person had really made a commitment to follow Jesus Christ, then saying that the person had been saved because they were baptized. But it isn't the baptism that saves you. Like Jewish handwashing, baptism is an outward symbol of an inward grace, the grace that has brought about confession of sin and spiritual renewal through faith in Christ. It is by grace that we are saved through faith. And baptism is an outward visible sign of the inward invisible salvation that we've already experienced.

So, it's the inner attitude and motivation of the heart that is the most important, and not the outward symbol. Jesus knew this and that's why he called the Pharisees hypocrites when they complained that his disciples weren't following the traditional ritualistic washings. Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah when he said, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

Jesus goes on to talk about clean and unclean foods. According to Jewish dietary law, there were certain foods the people shouldn't eat. But Jesus told the people that their holiness and cleanness before God wasn't based on refusing to eat certain foods, it was instead based on the inner attitudes and thoughts of their hearts. Jesus said that what we eat doesn't pass through our hearts, but through our stomachs and then out of our bodies. It's what starts on the inside, in our hearts, and then comes out that makes a person unclean, things like evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, greed, malice, deceit, envy, slander and arrogance. These are the thoughts, attitudes, and actions which make us unclean before God.

And I think we need to keep that in mind as we attend church, partake of Holy Communion, serve on committees, teach Sunday School or whatever we routinely or ritually do for the church. It's not our activity that makes us holy; it's our purity of heart and mind as we relate to God daily.

Having said that, based on what Jesus said in Mark 7, we also need to examine our "religiosity" based on what we read in James 1. Because if we study what James is saying, we'll see that he had no use for people with only an internal sort of faith. Now, before I explain that, I want to say that James does emphasize the need for people to have inner righteousness and purity as he mentions perseverance, resisting temptation, being slow to anger, getting rid of moral filth

and evil, and accepting God's word in order to have salvation. And he talks about the importance of listening, being quick to listen and slow to speak. That's so important for our relationships with others and with God. We must be good listeners of the word, eager to take in wisdom and understanding from God.

But James had no use for people who appeared to be listening to God, attending religious services, or reading scripture, but never seemed to act on what they had heard. There was no external evidence for their faith. It's as if they never really quite heard. Or, if they heard, it never quite clicked; they never seemed to make the connection between what the scripture was saying, and how they should be living their lives. They may have a whole wealth of good intentions, and good thoughts, but those good intentions never seem to find an outlet for expression in their daily activities. And when there is an opportunity to express their love and goodness, they often neglect it, or are too busy to even realize it.

Hopefully that doesn't describe any of us here today. But I think it really gives us something to think about. One concrete external evidence that James describes is gossip, slander and the way we talk. He says if anyone considers themselves religious and doesn't keep a tight rein on their tongue, they're deceiving themselves and their religion worthless. Those are pretty strong words. And our words can be very harsh, defensive and damaging, promoting ourselves and putting others down. Those kinds of words do damage to the reputation of Jesus Christ if used by Christians. But as Christians, we should be positively expressing our faith by pointing out the positive, encouraging others, saying things that are loving, tender, joyful and compassionate, always seeking to build another up in their faith or bringing them to faith in Jesus Christ. That's the kind of external evidence James is pointing to when he says, "be doers of the word, not merely hearers."

Another concrete example that James points to is looking after orphans and widows. And I think that's very important for us to remember. In the Old Testament God had some pretty strong things to say about a society that neglects its orphans and widows. Orphans and widows had no legal rights, and no means of support unless a relative or benefactor provided for them. In the New Testament one of the main service projects of the early church was providing for widows and orphans, and that's the way it's always been throughout church history.

But by mentioning orphans and widows, I think James was pointing out a much bigger concept. He was suggesting that Christians who are truly following

Christ will be actively involved in helping the poor, and the marginalized, the ones who need it the most. Of course it needs to begin with a church's own congregation. Are there widows and orphans in our own church who need our special love and attention? I think there are. That's why I always pray that God would help us remember to reach out to our shut-ins, many of whom are widows, with our phone calls, visits and cards. This is an important ministry that we should all be doing.

Are there children in our church who need special attention? Parents can always use some help. And in every church, there are those who feel marginalized, forgotten, lonely or troubled and God is calling each one of us to reach out and minister to them, just as he is calling us to love and minister to one another.

You know, it's easy for all of us to come to church with our "happy-face masks" on and just go through the motions of worship without being honest with God or with each other about what's really going on in our lives. But when we come to church and really take off our masks and be honest with each other about our real needs, then we allow God and other people to help us, and real fellowship can occur. Then the Holy Spirit can move in our midst as the needs of each of us are met and then we, in turn, can be motivated and empowered to minister to those beyond our church. And then the church will become an agent for positive change in the community.

This all became clear to a man named Basil of Caesarea in the fourth century. For a while Basil sought to develop his relationship with God by going into the desert. There he lived in a roofless hut and ate bread so hard that it wrenched the teeth out of his mouth. He came out of the desert with a deep piety and discipline, but also with the understanding that God has made us, like the members of our body, to need one another's help. We weren't made to live in isolation. As he matured in his faith, Basil worked to establish Christian communities of care that would reach out to the sick, the orphaned, and the weary. He could probably be called the founder of the Christian hospital movement. Basil discovered a religion that was not polluted by the world but was "pure and undefiled before God" and in touch with the world's needs.

I heard that Colorado was once kicking around the idea of passing a state law that would require churches to pay property taxes. The only exception would be churches that could prove that they were providing a significant service to the public. But isn't that what churches are supposed to be about? I'm very happy to say that I believe Winnemucca UMC is providing more than one significant service to our community. We allow our church to be used for the Ministerial Association

Soup Kitchen which we actively participate in at least once a month, sometimes more often. We allow an AA group to meet at our church on Wed. mornings. The National Alliance on Mental Illness Family Support Group is a vital ministry of our church, as well as the GriefShare support group. Besides that, we have our Tuesday Bible Study and Wed. Upper Room Study groups that provide Christian Education, fellowship and spiritual support. And we also have an active UMM group and United Women in Faith, that provide fellowship and service opportunities. And, I want to say that I'm really proud of the events we had this weekend. I think the Buckaroo Breakfast is a good fellowship and outreach opportunity for our church and provides missional funds for the Christian Motorcycle Assoc. and other good programs the UMM chooses to donate to.

And I really like it when groups like our UWIF do Rummage Sales because it gives many of us the opportunity to get rid of stuff we've been holding on to that we don't need and provide it at low cost, or even no cost, to folks who can use the stuff. Then the money that's made from the sale is used to support missional programs that the women choose to donate to. It's a lot of work, but it's really a great ministry!

These groups and activities are significant ways that we as a church are being doers of the word in Winnemucca. So, brothers and sisters, with hearts filled with godly attitudes and motives, in a close daily walk with Jesus, let us always strive to be, not merely listeners, but consistent and active doers of God's word.