

2 Sep 2012
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
James 1:17-27

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From the Heart

When I was in elementary school, I went with my neighbor to her Baptist church for a program called Awanas. There we got these little books. From it, we would memorize scripture passages or the books of the Bible. Each week we would recite what we'd learned and a teacher would sign off on it. Once a unit was finished, we would earn a little charm that would be attached to a special pin. We also earned points that went toward a week at summer camp. One year I got enough points to go to camp for free.

People took this very seriously. We'd show up with our Bibles and our booklets, ready to recite our scriptures, eager to get those check marks.

Many people of faith need that sort of structure. It's all about making sure we are right with God. When it's right there in front of us, in black and white, it's clear what we should believe. The challenge is when we get more caught up in checking off our lists that we forget to actually live our faith.

That's what got Jesus so bent out of shape with the Pharisees. "Don't worry about a couple of slices of bacon with your eggs. The food you eat doesn't make you immoral or evil. It's the thoughts and feelings that get put into action that prove who you really are."

Here were leaders who were life-long adherents to the Jewish tradition. They were so focused on following their purity laws that they missed the main point. Their knowledge and belief should have translated into action.

"²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." That's how James explains it. It's not enough to memorize scripture, to show up at church or Bible study, to check off what we have learned. If James were to hand us a checklist it would have only a few simple words: Pray. Love. Give. And "follow me."

Don't get me wrong...memorizing scripture has the benefit of giving us peace or encouragement. Recite the 23rd Psalm to find comfort. Pray the prayer of our Saviour for encouragement...but don't forget what the words mean. It's the meaning translated into action that Jesus was looking for. That's why he was so irate with the Pharisees. They were so intent on following their purity laws they became an end unto itself, instead of the guide they were intended as. Meanwhile the Pharisees missed the opportunities all around them to prove their faithfulness.

That is what James is getting at – what really is a test of our faith is how we treat and care for the most vulnerable in our midst. ²⁶⁻²⁷"Anyone who sets himself up as "religious" by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that

passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.”

During the Reformation – a period much more varied and widespread than we can truly know – there were many who picked up on the message in James. “...faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:16-18 ESV)

He is basically saying religion is “worthless” unless we live by what we profess we believe. It reminds me of the old hymn, “They”ll know we are Christians by our love...” We may not be able to look in the mirror and get an inkling of how others perceive us. We will know ourselves if we know our hearts. Like Jesus said, what comes from the heart (and I’ll add the mind) tells others all they need to know about us.

We may still need our checklists, but I think they are a bit shorter now. Pray. Love. Give. And as Jesus said, “Follow me.”

James 1 (NRSV)

¹⁷Every 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. ¹⁸In 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.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹Therefore 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. ²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But 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. ²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion 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.

The Message (MSG)

26-27 Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.