

God's Mirror, August 29, 2021, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Psalm 45.1-2, 7-10; James 1.17-27; Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“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.”

Prayer

It's not a good time to be religious—at least not if you want to be well-thought-of in society. Religion has been under attack since before Jesus' time but those attacks have intensified lately. Many of us are familiar with the shade thrown when someone says “I'm *spiritual* but not *religious*” (as though one is good and the other bad), but more recently organized religions have taken on an even more negative light. In Afghanistan as the country is in turmoil, the varying expressions of Islam have been highlighted through the different approaches of the fallen Afghan government, ISIS (or ISIS-K), and the Taliban who have taken control of the country. Closer to home, those who adhere to the Christian religion have come under increasing scrutiny as the public becomes more aware of the connection of Christian Churches to the Residential Schools, especially as more unmarked graves are discovered.

There is ample evidence for one to conclude that it is actually “religion” that is the problem. And many have come to that conclusion. All religion, they reason, must be bad and should be avoided.

And yet we hear that religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to care for orphans and widows in distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. That sounds noble and good. Perhaps we've just been doing religion *wrong* all this time.

But if you've come here today for instructions, it's not going to be easy. We only looked at two readings today (not including the psalm) and they seem to be saying the opposite of each other. First we heard from the letter of James. He is the source of that quote I've repeated twice already, the one about true religion. It seems as though he might be a good place to look if we were hoping for direction on how to navigate this complicated world.

And James spells thing out for his reader. Plainly. Simply. Do not be merely *hearers* of the word. Instead, be *doers* of the word.

Sounds simple, right? Straightforward.

But hold on just a minute. Before you get too excited and run off to start *doing* things, we have to look at what the gospel says. What does Jesus say?

Well, based on his interactions with the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus seems to say that we ought *not* to be merely *doers* of the word. If we do things without purpose, we are deluding ourselves. We become hypocrites.

We can understand what James is saying—empty words are worthless if they aren't accompanied by *actions*, but Jesus makes his audience realize that there are such things as empty *actions* as well. These empty actions are what has come to exemplify “religion” in the minds of so many critics. And that's what Jesus is warning against. Any action, *especially* if it is a routine action or part of a religious ritual, has the potential of becoming an empty action, signifying nothing. Not accomplishing anything. I think we can see this in our religious setting. It's not hard to get so attached to one aspect of what we *do* at

church that we forget *why* we do it at all. Pretty soon that action—you can fill in your own blank here for whatever makes the most sense to you: particular songs, or prayers...or gestures even (among many other possible examples)—any of them can become empty, hollowed out of the meaning and significance they once had.

I think even giving alms—donating to the poor or the church, for example—can become empty and meaningless gestures if we have stopped recognizing what is *behind* that giving, what it means.

But then, how do we know if we are merely hearing and not doing? And, even more challenging, how can we tell if the actions we *are* doing are just empty gestures?

This is where the metaphor that James uses comes in handy. James talks about a mirror. And what is necessary is looking in the mirror—or, put another way, “self-reflection”. We need to take some time reflecting on what we do and what is important to us so that we can see what God is revealing to us. God is, as we heard, the father of lights, and the giver of every good gift that comes down from above. What good is a mirror if we don’t have light? And what good is a mirror if it doesn’t show us an accurate reflection of ourselves?

God has given us an incredible gift—the gift of self-reflection. If we take the time to reflect—if we gaze deeply into the mirror, we will see *ourselves* reflected back to us. If we take the time to look deeply, God will give us a perfect gift from above; our father of lights will enlighten our vision and allow us to see—to see ourselves clearly. That we might know our intentions and see when they are evil, or when our actions are empty. That we might see *who we are*, and that we might also see who we might *become*.

But *seeing* alone is not enough. If we reflect on who we are and on who God is calling us to be, we need to *act* on that as well. We cannot be mere *seers*, we need to be *doers* as well.

And that is hard work. It’s hard work just taking the time to reflect—to really take the time to understand our own motivations and intentions, evaluating our actions and what is behind them. And it is never really completed, either. It’s a life-long process. But the work doesn’t stop at just seeing and recognizing who we are and who we might become. Because the work continues—it continues as we struggle to *become* what we see. As we strive to do those things that matter most—to do the actions that have meaning and express God’s will for our lives and this world.

Do we have the courage to look deeply? To really understand who we are? To self-reflect, both individually and as a community, seeing ourselves as God sees us and striving to become what God sees we might become?

Or do we do what is easy, and turn away from that reflection, and immediately forget what we look like? Taking the path that is easy?

May God increase in us *pure religion*—may we be unstained by this world as we seek to serve those in need, expressing our faith in actions and not empty gestures. Not falling into patterns and habits but genuinely helping the widow, the orphan, the poor, the lonely. May we see God’s will for our lives when we look deep into ourselves—and may we seek to bring that picture into reality.