

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“That's just a man-made construct. It is not from God.” This response is used quite often when people disagree on theological issues. The implication of course, is that the speaker would never base his or her own thoughts on anything as fallible as human thought. It is ironic (or hypocritical depending upon how charitable we choose to be). The fact of the matter is, everything we think about God is the result of human understanding. We do not have the luxury of hand-written stone tablets or golden plates. Instead, we have the Bible and the teachings of those who have come before us. Even the Bible is a man-made construct. It's content, while inspired by God, was not written by God. It is a collection of the experience of God by peoples thousands of years ago that still manages to resonate with us today. So labeling something as merely “man-made” in order to dismiss it is rather disingenuous.

Still, there are those times when man-made precepts take over what God actually wants to happen. Such was the case in our Gospel reading today. By not following a particular tradition, Jesus' disciples were seen as being defiled. Now the Pharisees, bless their hearts, were trying to do the right thing as they saw it. They may have been genuinely curious, rather than snarky, about why the disciples didn't do the ritual washing before eating. But it didn't come across that way. Jesus calls them hypocrites. Such a harsh response would have been over the top if the questioners had been genuinely interested in why the disciples chose a different way. I think Jesus' response would have been different had they been trying to learn instead of trying to rebuke.

Notice that Jesus doesn't call them on the validity of their question, but on their motivation. They were trying to score points by pointing out the short-comings of the disciples. If their master let them get away with this, what else were they doing? Our Lord is calling the scribes and Pharisees out not on their theology but on their self-righteousness. After he settles that point, then he addresses the teaching. The idea there is they miss the point. Washing one's hands before eating doesn't make one clean, because eating certain things doesn't make one defiled. Instead of worrying about what people are eating, they should worry about themselves and what they are doing. The sign of doing God's will wasn't in eating or not eating certain foods or in a certain way. Turning one's life to God was about how we treat other people. What goes in doesn't define the heart; it's what comes out.

Eating lobster, for example, doesn't make people do those things our Lord listed. Good thing, too, given our annual Lobsterfest last night. And while there is scientific evidence that eating raw oysters can affect a person's libido, I don't think that was what Jesus had in mind. And it wouldn't explain theft, murder, wickedness, and the rest. Our Lord's point was that following the letter of the law with regard to certain practices did not make one a good person. God wants nothing more than for us to love him and one another. At the same time, God wants nothing *less* than for us to love him and one another. It is easy to comprehend yet takes a lifetime to figure out.

At the same time, it takes more than just lip-service. This is a theme in the epistle of James. We don't really know which James wrote the epistle. It was probably not our patron, St. James the Greater.

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Most scholars seem to agree that if it were written by a “known” James, it was probably the one known as James of Jerusalem, the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. Martin Luther doubted that it was written by one of the apostles at all. Luther – at least as my Lutheran Church History professor reported it – said that the Bible contains the Gospel as the manger contained the baby Jesus. Of course, there was a lot of straw in the manger as well. For Luther, the Epistle of James was an epistle of straw. Luther later toned down his rhetoric and acquiesced to James' inclusion in the canon.

In James we have what seems almost a direct conflict with the teaching of St. Paul on faith and works. The problem is not that they had different views, but that they were approaching the same middle from different ends of the spectrum. Paul was generally writing to people struggling with the idea that it took following the law, their own works, to achieve salvation. Paul was saying that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. James, though, seems to be writing to a community that had no problem expressing their faith in words, but were slow to live out that faith in works. Our good works do not save us, but they are our outward expressions of our salvation. We can't earn our salvation, but we shouldn't rely on cheap grace, either.

The phrase, “cheap grace” comes from a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called The Cost of Discipleship. Bonhoeffer wrote the book in Germany during the rise of Naziism. He was executed for being part of a plot to assassinate Hitler in 1943. Bonhoeffer was willing to pay the price of discipleship. Bonhoeffer describes cheap grace this way:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.

St. James reminds us that we are to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” We can't delude ourselves into thinking that just because we call ourselves Christians that we are living Christian lives. Sure, for the most part we can avoid the obvious ones – murder, theft, adultery. The ones that take at least a modicum of planning. But as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Just because you don't rob a liquor store, it doesn't make you a good person.” I'm paraphrasing a bit. Refraining from evil is not the same thing as being good. And just saying the right things is not the same thing as doing the right things.

St. Augustine defined evil as the absence of good, much as dark is the absence of light. The reverse is not true: Good is not the absence of evil. Indifference and apathy are not virtues. Whatever surface differences Luther might have observed between James and Paul, their central message is the same: Faith and works go hand in hand. As we will read next week, “Faith without works is dead.” We do not seek to do good to *cause* our salvation but *because* of our salvation. We are called to bear good fruit. May God grant us the wisdom to see the opportunity bear fruit and the strength and courage to carry it out. In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*