



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Religion: Pure and undefiled

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

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and 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.) ⁵So 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?' ⁶He 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;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines."*

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.'

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

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

James 1: 17-27

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. 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.

19 You 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.

22 But 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.*

26 If 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 theme of both New Testament texts today is the purity code that was at the heart of the Hebrew faith. The importance of these rules governing ritual purity was brought home to me when I was in Jerusalem a few years ago. I toured an archeological dig that was near the site of the temple wall. It was the residence for temple priests. What struck me about the site was the number of bathing pools. Not one, not two.. but many! In the ancient world, one needed to be "pure and undefiled" to enter into the presence of God.

The prophets, witnesses to these elaborate purification, decried this practice that went to such lengths to "be pure and undefiled" yet ignored the needs of the poor and the outcast. Jesus was also in this same prophetic tradition. His parable of the *Good Samaritan* was precisely about this hypocrisy: the concerns of the religious establishment for its own "purity" and its active disregard for those in need. (In the text that I just read to you from Mark, Jesus was accused of being unclean. "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?'"

The letter of James (also) addressed the purity code. But he did so with neither subtlety nor tact. He told it like he saw it. He had no time for hypocrisy: "be doers of the Word and not merely hearers." James was a "moralist" of the first order. He compared religious hypocrisy to adultery, even murder. He had an edgy, cynical tone: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?" The message that coursed through his letter was "Faith without works, is dead."

When he addressed the challenges of the purity code, he declared that religious ritual without justice is a sham. He gave his readers a new purity code: "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." Two transitive verbs: **1. Care. 2. Keep.** The first is directed outward, (the way we act and behave). Care for those in need. The second speaks to our inner lives: the content of our heart. Keep your thoughts, your heart and soul clean.

I

Care: "Care for orphans and widows in their distress." This message courses through the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and James is in this prophetic tradition. He reminded believers that caring for the alienated, the weak, the helpless, and those in distress is not something nice that we should do.... It is why we exist. It is the core of our existence. We were created to be caring people... caring for the needs of our sisters and brothers.

When James was alive, there existed no safety net for those who became the victims of circumstance. The expression “widows and orphans” referred to those who fell outside the benefits of society. Consider: a wife was completely owned by her husband. If she was widowed she had no options or choices. She had one hope: that a brother or family member of her husband would marry her and provide for her. Barring that, she would be forced to scrounge an existence for herself. This could mean begging, prostitution, or indentured slavery. Orphans, likewise, were left to their own wits for survival. The Old Testament prophets, from Amos to Jeremiah, continually reminded the kings of this failure of society. It was, in short, injustice and it was abomination in the eyes of God.

Texts like this cause me to lose sleep. As a “keeper of a religious organization”, I know that when I stand before my maker and account for my ministry this is what will matter. The size of the churches, the quality of my sermons, the number of members, the size, number and quality of the choirs, the number of capital drives, the cleanliness of the bathrooms, the honors and awards.... All those things are nice now, but I will ultimately be held accountable for how my congregations treat the *widows and orphans*: those who lay by the side of the society’s main highway.

As we consider our history, but more importantly our future, here at PPC, our vitality, (or lack thereof) will be in relation to our faithfulness to care for the distressed and those in need.

II

Keep. This refers to our inner lives. We are called to “keep ourselves unstained or untarnished by the world.” This is the art of faithful living. It is what it means to practice holiness. First of all, we need to be very careful about understanding how the term “world” was used by James. He was not condemning creation. One of our fundamental beliefs is God created the world, and created it *good*. The Hebrew word for “good” in the creation story is *tov*... which implies not merely utilitarian goodness, but also ethical goodness. When James referred to “the world”, he was writing about the world in its rebellion or rejection of God.

Holiness, the art of faithful living, is living “**in**” this world, yet not being “**of**” this world. This is a creative tension. We are called to live in a world that has rebelled, sinned and fallen short. We can’t escape it. We can’t build a fence around us to protect us.

Like Jesus we live out our days in **this** world.

- This world feeds us.
- This world nurtures us.

- This world gives us joy.

One of the condemnations of Jesus by the religious establishment was that he spent too much time “in the world”.

- He ate and drank with sinners.
- He associated with the impure.
- He drank water from the same well as a Samaritan woman.

Jesus was **in** the world, but he was not stained or tarnished by the world. He was not “**of**” the world. This is the art of Christian living. How do we live in this world, without be “stained” by it? We might understand this in terms of traveling to a different country.

I love to travel and visit other countries. I love the food, the culture, the sounds, the smells, the music, the sights, etc. That is all part of foreign travel. But I am always a stranger. As much as I enjoy myself, I know that this is not my home, not my nation, and that I have my own country. Periodically, each day, I usually check my pocket or bag to make sure that my passport is there. It is my reminder that I am traveling through, a stranger in a strange land. I belong somewhere else.

We need to understand living in this world as travelers in a foreign land. It is to be richly enjoyed and fully experienced, but it is not our ultimate home. Our identity comes from a different kingdom or nation. If I may extend the analogy a bit, our passport is the bible. It contains our stories. It is stamped with the places we have been and the lives we have lived. It is a collection of books and stories of our people and our God... and it accompanies us on our journey, reminding us who we are as we continue our pilgrimage.

I am often uncomfortable when I read the book of James. I get the feeling that he knows more about me than I want someone to know. He knows about my love of things and my duplicity. He knows of my attempts to rationalize my behavior; my attempts to have my cake and eat it too; in short my hypocrisy.

He also knows churches well. He knows that we become distracted and often forget our core, (caring and keeping), as we go about our work. Like an Old Testament prophet, he gets in our face and tells us what we are.... But the gift he gives is a reminder of what we could be, (what God has called us to do and be), people who care for the needy of the world. People who travel through this world, enjoying it and giving thanks to God for it, but people who are ultimately at home with God. This is the good news. Amen.