

“It’s What’s Inside That Counts”

A sermon by Ruling Elder Kathy Hartzell
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
August 29, 2021

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. ¹⁸ In 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; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹ Therefore 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. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But 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. ²⁷ 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.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-23 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ² they 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; ⁴ and 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.) ⁵ So 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?” ⁶ He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,
⁷ ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;
⁸ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’
⁹ You 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: ¹⁵ there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”
¹⁷ When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. ¹⁸ He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, ¹⁹ since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. ²¹ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Have you ever been on your computer and accidentally switched to the screen that shows you the HTML code behind the page. It’s a page filled with lines of words, symbols and numbers. To most of us it makes no sense, it’s a foreign language but it has an important purpose. It’s written to format and design the pages on our screens so the words and images display properly. The rules require great attention and are very detailed. Today, there’s a high demand for skilled coders. These individuals have a deep understanding of the rules needed to bring order out of chaos on our many devices.

As I reflected on the scriptures for today, the HTML code came to mind. I thought, the Pharisees of Jesus’ time had taken the commandments of God and the teaching of the Elders and created an extremely detailed code for the people of Israel to follow. The code had every activity of one’s life scripted. The one specifically referred to in today’s scripture had to do with

the ceremonial cleansing before every meal. The pharisees didn't call out Jesus and his followers for not following tradition simply because they were guilty of bad manners or for personal hygiene practices. In their minds, to dismiss this law was to be unclean in the sight of God. The man who ate with unclean hands was open to attacks from the demon Shibta and become liable to poverty and destruction.¹

Unfortunately, the task was not simply washing one's hands. There was code inside the code. The hands had to be washed with water held in special large stone jars so that the water itself was clean in a ceremonial way. The hands had to be held in specific positions first fingertips pointed up and then fingertips pointed down.² There are more instructions to this practice but I think you get the picture of how complicated and detailed it is. Perhaps the Pharisees saw the influence Jesus had on his followers and the people and wanted him keep the practice so others would find value in it.

Neither Jesus or James attempt to throw away all the traditions and commandments of God, rather Jesus openly questions the use of these rules and calls out the hypocrisy of keeping them in name only. I think Jesus used this opportunity to address the many concerns and questions the gentiles and others in the Jewish community had about following the rituals and religious traditions. In the New testament, the issues of food and cleansing come up often and are addressed, first by Jesus, also Paul and James, so these concerns are not to be taken lightly. Jesus doesn't confront the Pharisees as an outsider. When he turns the table on their concerns, he does so as a deeply religious Jew who cites the prophetic tradition of Israel in reproving their selfish interests. He asserts their hearts are far from God.

'This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.' (Is. 29:13 NRSV)

Having traditions, sacraments and practices to honor God, and to join together in community for good works that glorify God is important. But now as then, we live in a diverse society and need to be aware of how we communicate and demonstrate the heart of our own religious traditions. Our challenge today is to recognize how we, like the Pharisees, misinterpret what is important to God. In considering the heart of our faith, it is difficult to preach about our human inclination to the list of evil actions in verses 21 and 22. We are all susceptible to sin and are guilty of practicing one or more of the sins listed here. If we want to examine the heart of our religion, we must be willing to explore honestly whether our attitudes and actions reveal genuine love for God and compassion for others. Christ's words remind us that the growth in our capacity to love is directly related to an increased awareness of the hidden intentions of our hearts.³

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. Revised Edition, 1975. P. 165.

² Barclay. P. 165.

³ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B. Volume 4. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville KY. 2009. Pgs. 22-23

While Jesus dismisses the ritual, he calls great attention to the character and intent of their lifestyle. James opens this up more with a vision of a faithful life. Living such a life means avoiding hypocrisy so that one may live more faithfully in relationship to God. We chose to live with ethical understanding and loving attitudes which encourages our awareness of God and impact our relationship with loved ones and strangers. James reminds us that “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above.” God nurtures us, gives us gifts, and provides direction for our lives, often using human agency to do so. In his keen observation of human nature, James begins with the power of human speech both to build up and to destroy.⁴

A few years ago, while studying other philosophies and religious traditions, I read a Toltec Wisdom Book by Don Miguel Ruiz, titled “The Four Agreements.” The Toltec culture of Mexico ended a thousand plus years ago but the universal message of their wisdom, which is right in step with scripture, lives on. The first and most important of the four agreements starts with “Be Impeccable with Your Word.” It sounds very simple but it is very powerful. One’s word is the gift directly from God.⁵ The word *impeccable* comes from the Latin word *peccatus* which means “sin.” The *im* in *impeccable* means “without.” So *impeccable* means “without sin.”⁶ Ruiz teaches that being impeccable with one’s word is the correct use of one’s energy; it means to use one’s energy in the direction of truth and love.⁷

Similarly, James connects the importance of how we relate to one another by how we use words. He knew that our words reveal something about our motivation, intention, belief, and emotional life. For example, anger is an emotion that can be destructive or can be a warning of some wrongdoing. Therefore, anger can be channeled in ways that lead to protest and improvement. We make the decision about its meaning in our lives. James knows this. He does not deny the importance or strength of anger. Rather, he encourages us to transform anger into a virtue. “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”

This is hard work, especially for those of us who are quick to judge, impatient with ourselves and with others, particularly when we are in disagreement or have already made up our mind. To resist such impatience requires discipline and cultivating the virtues of a discerning and welcoming spirit. James counsels us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. What we do matters and what comes out of our mouth can make a difference.⁸ Through thoughtful words and faithful activity we create and re-create ourselves in trustworthy ways and help build world’s worthy of trust. Actions add value to our words and give them life.⁹

I’m reminded of the *Foundation of Hope* in Pittsburgh. This is the foundation I worked at for my field education in my last year at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. The foundation runs the chaplain office at the Allegheny County Jail. On the foundation website you can find

⁴ Feasting, P. 14.

⁵ Don Miguel Ruiz. *The Four Agreements: A Toltec Wisdom Book*. Amber-Allen Publishing Inc. San Rafael, CA. 1997. Pgs. 25-26.

⁶ Ruiz. P. 31

⁷ Ruiz. P. 32.

⁸ Feasting, Pgs. 16, 18.

⁹ Feasting P. 18.

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information about the PIRC (Positive Initiative to Reinforce Change) movement. Their motto reflects much of what I am speaking of today.

Our Thoughts become our words.
Our words become our actions.
Our actions become our habits.
Our habits become our character.
Our character becomes our destiny.

These words are not new. They are attributed to a Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, born in 571 BCE. He called for the people of his time to watch your thoughts, words, actions, etc. This philosophy has been repeated by the leaders of many cultures, such as Buddha and Gandhi. It seems to me to be a universal teaching which crosses over time and space, cultures and religions. Jesus reinforces the first step of the process by focusing on the heart. Jesus uses the word “heart” three times in this scripture. With each reference we sense the importance of the human heart for our own religious faith and practices. Since the heart was thought to be the center of one’s will and decision-making abilities. Christ urges us to consider our own hearts rather than our neighbor’s dirty hands.¹⁰ Here, Jesus stresses that the thought, which is born in the heart, is the father of the deed.¹¹ Jesus declares the whole ritual irrelevant and that uncleanness has nothing to do with what a person takes into their body but everything to do with what comes out of their heart.

So too, the Toltec wisdom echoes Jesus’ teachings. Through the first agreement, “Be Impeccable with Your Word,” one can attain the kingdom of heaven.¹² Today, our culture views decisions of the heart to be emotional and sometimes less effective than using our heads. This may be true when it comes to tasks which require detailed steps or instructions. But when it comes to being in relationship with God, we are encouraged to be a reflection of Jesus Christ’s heart. A heart of compassion, justice, patience, and care. All the attributes of love, which is the nature, the character of God. We are by no means perfect. This God knows well. But, as Paul tells us, “For while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.” (Rom 5:6 NRSV) If God saw fit to reconcile us, ungodly as we are, shouldn’t we work to do the same for each other. I am challenged to work on this daily, sometimes, hourly but the habit is well worth making. If you are living this way, please help others to join you on this path. If this is a first time for you to consider this interpretation, it is never too late to start. Just remember, it’s what’s inside that counts.

¹⁰ Feasting. P. 23.

¹¹ Feasting. P. 25.

¹² Ruiz. Pg. 46.