

Weekend Readings & Reflections

August 28-29, 2021 – Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reflection: Today's Gospel casts Jesus in a prophetic light as one having authority to interpret God's law. Jesus' quotation from Isaiah today is ironic (see [Isaiah 29:13](#)). In observing the law, the Pharisees honor God by ensuring that nothing unclean passes their lips. In this, however, they've turned the law inside out, making it a matter of simply performing certain external actions. The gift of the law, which we hear God giving to Israel in today's First Reading, is fulfilled in Jesus' Gospel, which shows us the law's true meaning and purpose (see [Matthew 5:17](#)). The law, fulfilled in the Gospel, is meant to form our hearts, to make us pure, able to live in the Lord's presence. The law was given that we might live and enter into the inheritance promised to us—the kingdom of God, eternal life. Israel, by its observance of the law, was meant to be an example to surrounding nations. As James tells us in today's Epistle, the Gospel was given to us that we might have new birth by the Word of truth. By living the Word we've received, we're to be examples of God's wisdom to those around us, the "first fruits" of a new humanity. This means we must be "doers" of the Word, not merely hearers of it. As we sing in today's Psalm and hear again in today's Epistle, we must work for justice, taking care of our brothers and sisters and living by the truth God has placed in our hearts. The Word given to us is a perfect gift. We should not add to it through vain and needless devotions. Nor should we subtract from it by picking and choosing which of His laws to honor. "Hear me," Jesus says in today's Gospel. Today, we're called to examine our relationship to God's law. Is the practice of our religion a pure listening to Jesus, a humble welcoming of the Word planted in us and able to save our souls? Or are we only paying lip service?



OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Welcome to our study for the Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. Let us open in prayer:

All: O Heart of Love, I put all my trust in Thee; for I fear all things from my own weakness, but I hope for all things from Thy Goodness. Amen.

- Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque, *Invocation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*

Leader: The Father would not send his Son simply so that we could live lukewarm lives, hiding behind the profile of being a "good person," when we are not denying ourselves completely and giving ourselves to God. His plan involves us being in a deep and profound relationship with him, so that he can transform us into the likeness of his Son, not just people who are content with living in mediocrity. This transformation is demanding because we are not able to live with the following attitude: "I can live however I want as long as I don't hurt anybody." God asks much more of us than that, and if we live our lives in accordance with the truths of the Gospel, then he will give us joy everlasting. As you watch this short video, consider how you think of God in your own life and if you are willing to lift up your heart to him.

Digging Deeper

There is a lot of confusion on the precise nature of faith. If asked to explain it, most Christians would probably talk about taking "a leap of faith," particularly when encountering a difficult doctrine or a trying period in life. By faith, we believe in that which cannot yet be seen - namely, the eternal life that God has planned for us. We believe that God has a plan for our lives, for "God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). Faith does not mean that we put aside our reason and simply "believe." St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that faith is an actual knowledge, albeit a knowledge beyond our senses. It is possible to know with certainty that God exists that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. Faith, which is a theological virtue, makes such knowledge possible. It is a pure gift from God, meaning we can't make ourselves have more faith, but we can and should pray and beg God to always increase our faith. We can also live a life that disposes us to be able to receive the gift of faith.

(Play the video on [FORMED.org](#) - [Opening the Word – 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time \(Year B\)](#))

FIRST READING ~ Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 ~

Moses said to the people: "Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. In your observance of the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin upon you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, 'This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.' For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him? Or what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"

Deuteronomy literally means 'second book of law'. The 10 commandments given to Moses when applied to daily life became a large set of 613 guidelines to live a holy life. These are explored in the Book of Deuteronomy and added to by the teaching of the elders. Jewish people treasured their laws as a national treasure. Truth. Wisdom. Justice.

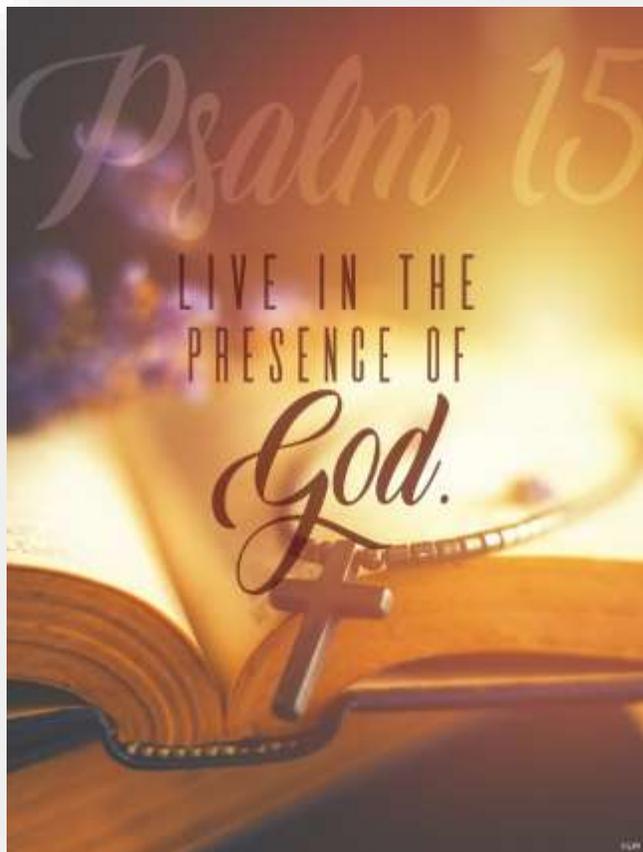
- **Is a relationship helped or hindered by laws? What religious guidelines do you observe carefully? What practices have you found help you feel close to God?**

SECOND READING ~ James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27 ~

Dearest brothers and sisters: All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change. He willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The Letter of James is regarded as a Catholic or general letter as it was not written for a particular community. James insists liturgy and life-style are linked together. He paints a beautiful picture: a disciple is like a new birth, a new creation of truth made from the WORD. Like the first-fruit of a plant, the seed of the word is planted in us and should show itself outwardly. Eventually the aim of the plant is to look like something - actions of caring for orphans and widows (the lowest in society) and an unworldly character. Planting takes some preparation and nurturing.

- **How could you allow the word to be more fully planted in you? It is easy for religion to be skin deep. Who are orphans and widows in your life? What would it look like for you to be unstained by the world - less worldly?**



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

When the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. --For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds. -- So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts. You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." He summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile. "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, un-chastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."

- **Do you relate with having false ideas about the nature of God? What other images of God do you have that might not conform to the Gospel?**

Returning back to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is in Galilee but spies from Jerusalem come to watch him. Pharisees and scribes seek to shame him in public telling Jesus and his disciples they are not keeping the traditions of the elders (613 laws) and obeying the purity codes. Eating food is an intimate practice as it involves what goes into our bodies. Washing and cleansing rules were to apply. These rules gradually developed into such a complex list that poor and working people of the land could not satisfy all the conditions. This experience turned religion into oppression and made people feel distant from God. Jesus challenged this dynamic of oppression and exclusion under the guise of holiness.

- **How might Jesus challenge us today?**

Pharisees saw themselves as lay people stirring up the faithful toward a super-piety. Israel was called to Holiness. Two characteristics mark the Pharisee spirituality. (1) religion becomes a set of rules to be lived rather than a relationship of love to be lived. (2) Judgement is made of others who do not follow rules consequently separating those who are 'in (clean)' and 'out (unclean)'.

- **How can you see this dynamic within yourself? In others? What does authentic holiness look like for you?**

MEDITATION

Which is more important to God - clean hands or a clean mind and heart? The Scribes and Pharisees were upset with Jesus because he allowed his disciples to break with their ritual traditions by eating with unclean hands. They sent a delegation all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee to bring their accusation in a face-to-face confrontation with Jesus. Jesus dealt with their accusation by going to the heart of the matter - by looking at God's intention and purpose for the commandments.

Jesus explains that they void God's command because they allow their hearts and minds to be clouded by their own notions of what is true religion. Jesus accuses them specifically of two things. First of hypocrisy. Like actors, who put on a show, they appear to obey God's word in their external practices while they inwardly harbor evil desires and intentions. Secondly, he accuses them of abandoning God's word by substituting their own arguments and ingenious interpretations for what God requires. They devised clever arguments based on their own thoughts rather than on God's word. Jesus refers them to the prophecy of Isaiah (29:31) where the prophet accuses the people of his day for honoring God with their lips while their hearts were far away from choosing and doing what God asked of them.

Where does evil spring from and what's the solution for eliminating it from our lives? Jesus deals with this issue in response to the religious leaders' concern with ritual defilement - making oneself unfit to offer acceptable sacrifice and worship to God. The religious leaders were concerned with avoiding ritual defilement, some no doubt out of fear of God, and others out of fear of pleasing other people. Jesus points his listeners to the source of true defilement - evil desires which come from inside a person's innermost being. Sin does not happen. It first springs from the innermost recesses of our thoughts and intentions, from the secret desires which only the individual soul can conceive. God in his mercy sent his Son Jesus Christ to free us from our sinful cravings and burden of guilt, and to restore us to wholeness of life and goodness. But to receive his mercy and healing, we must admit our faults and ask for his forgiveness. *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:8-9).

Only God can change our hearts and make them clean and whole through the power of the Holy Spirit. Like a physician who probes the wound before treating it, God through his Word and Spirit first brings to light our sinful condition that we may recognize sin for what it is and call upon God's mercy and pardon. The Lord is ever ready to change and purify our hearts through his Holy Spirit who dwells within us. His power and grace enables us to choose what is good and to reject what is evil.

- **Is there anything that stands out to you in this meditation?**
- **Do you allow any sinful desires to enter the door of your heart and mind?**
- **Do you believe in the power of God's love to change and transform your heart?**

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader: In closing, let us now pray ...

ALL: Lord Jesus, fill me with your Holy Spirit and make my heart like yours - on fire with love and holiness. Strengthen my will that I may always choose to love what is good and to reject what is evil. Amen.

Leader: (if time, let us offer up our intercessions ... St. Michael... Our Father... Hail Mary... Glory Be...)

[Opening reflection was shared from St. Paul Center at <https://stpaulcenter.com/studies-tools/sunday-bible-reflections>]

[video can be found at FORMED.ORG "Opening the Word". Additional reflections can be found at FORMED in "Opening the Word"]

[Discussion questions created by Fr Frank Bird sm, Marist Priest, and distributed by www.maristlitynz.org, were shared with permission from www.livingtheword.org.nz.]

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