

JAMES 1:17-27 (p. 977)

SEPTEMBER 2, 2018

MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 (p. 818)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Still our hearts Lord, so that we might sense your Presence. Quiet our minds Lord, so that we might receive a Word addressed to our lives. And animate our actions Lord, with your Holy Spirit, so that we might boldly witness to you in everything that we say and do. In Jesus' Name we ask this, Amen.

“GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS”

It's a Holiday weekend, so, I thought I'd share one of my favorite Holiday stories. It's about Thanksgiving though, so bear with me. Mary was a precocious eight-year-old, who simply treasured everything about Thanksgiving! She loved the weather and the season. She loved getting together with family and friends. She loved all of the celebration, and all of the food. And she especially loved helping her mom prepare everything! Mary diligently washed the turkey, and laid out all the pans. She would stand on a chair in the kitchen, right next to her mom, and help mix up all of the spices.

Her family had a holiday legacy too, an ancient recipe handed down from generation to generation. And Mary especially loved hearing her mom talk about how important this was, all the details; the right oven temperature, the exact baking time, the need to baste the bird during cooking, and how often that should be! She just flat got into it! So, when it came to her favorite part, the part where her family cut off those great big turkey legs, and arrange them in a pan of their own, just so, Mary was almost giddy with excitement!

She did have a question though. Eight-year-olds are filled with questions, in case you hadn't noticed. And this particular question had been gnawing at Mary for several years. So, she just came right out and asked. "Mom, why do we cut the legs off of the turkey, and cook them separately, by themselves?" Her mother paused, unsure what to say. "Why I'm don't know, Honey. That's just the way I was taught by my mother. Why don't you give your grandma a call, and ask her?" So, Mary did!

Only grandma came back with the same answer. "I don't know either," she said. "That's just how my mother taught me, when I was a little girl. You know though, great grandma and I will both be at your house in a couple of hours for dinner. Why don't we ask her then?" Mary agreed.

By the time grandma and great-grandma drove in the driveway, Mary's curiosity had worked itself into a frenzy! She could hardly contain herself! She just had to know the secret! She was so excited, in fact, that she didn't even let great-grandma get in the door. She rushed out of the house when they drove in, down the driveway, and jumped right into the car! "Great Grandma," she said "Great Grandma! Why do we always cut the legs off of the Thanksgiving turkey, and cook them separately, in their very own pan?" To which Great Grandma answered with a laugh, "Child, I don't why you and your mother and your grandmother do it! I always cut the legs off of my Turkey because my roasting pan was too small!"

And we laugh, don't we! It seems absurd! But maybe we laugh nervously? Because at some level, we can all relate. We all know someone, "someone else", of course, who does "something", simply because it's tradition!

The Pharisees and Teachers of the Law are the respected religious leaders of the Jewish faith. Don't forget that. And they have come down from the capital city of Jerusalem to find out more about this Jesus fellow. They've heard some pretty amazing things! Some of them may have even seen some amazing things! Jesus healed a possessed man! Sent the demons into a herd of pigs! He healed a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years! And restored a little girl to life! He fed five thousand people, out in the middle of nowhere! And then, that same night, walked out into the middle of the lake, on the water! Jesus has taught with profound insights into the faith! And currently, He seems to have quite a following! So, they want to know more! Who wouldn't?

Only when these Rabbis, these Teachers of the Law—Scholars, Clergy-types—when they arrive, they discover that Jesus' Disciples are not adhering to the "Traditions of the Elders". They're aghast! Again, who wouldn't be? These people love the Lord their God with all of their hearts, and with all of their minds, and all of their strength! Or, so they believe! They have been taught "right from wrong" since the time they were children! These are the folks now charged with keeping the faith, intact, and handing it on, intact, to future generations! To see other professed believers acting in such an improper way, well, it pricks their sense of conscious! It'd be like me, some Sunday, forgetting a prayer, or messing up the Order of Worship. Can you imagine?

So, picture if you will, an auspicious Ecclesiastical Body, the Benzie County Ministerial Association maybe, or a bunch of Elders from the National Office in Indianapolis. Or better yet, imagine a whole busload of Seminary Professors, Bishops and District Superintendents, joining us for Worship. But then, right in the middle of the service, or at the end, just as I am about to raise my hand for the Benediction, these “learned types” leap out of their seats, and together storm right up here to the pulpit! They have issues! Strong issues! Issues with how we do things here at Blaine! And because they love the Lord so much—truly, because they love the Lord—the feel compelled to tell us about them! To correct them! To correct us! How would that make you feel?

A well-dressed, middle-aged woman points out that we did not use a real loaf of bread for Communion in Second Service, just those little wafer things! And although we did use a real loaf in the First Service, it was entirely too small for the proper “visual effect”! “In addition”, she sputters, “the Grape Juice obviously wasn’t Welch’s!”

A second man, a distinguished looking gentleman, probably a Pastor from somewhere—they all look distinguished, right—explains to us Country Bumpkins that we need at least two Responsive Readings in our Order of Worship. And maybe an additional prayer. We could do that in place of the “Special Music”, he suggests. He adds that we don’t see “Special Music” mentioned in the Book of Acts at all! And then the Music Director from a “well-known”, “well-established” Downtown Church—one of those “Tall Steeple Churches”—hands us a type-written, double-spaced list of “Approved Hymns”! And says we need to use only these!

How does that make you feel? Again, these Pharisees are not the bad guys we often make them out to be. They are experts! And they are just here to help! They want to make sure that we are doing things the “right way”, maintaining “Proper Worship”, doing things the way God has designed for them to be! ...Now I’m being a little over the top! But that still happens today! In fact, it happens a lot! And it’s not always “learned folks” who share the suggestions!

So, how would you respond? What would you say to this entourage of religious dignitaries? I mean they have traveled a long way to get here, just to impart their wisdom on us. They have studied for years, don’t forget, to make sure they get it “right”. They are just here to help, you know, to make things better. So, how does that really feel?

What would you say to them? I mean they are guests, and hospitality is clearly biblical. Maybe smile politely, and nod your head? Maybe acknowledge their contribution, and even their position, but then send them on their way? Tell me, do you think you would even consider the changes that they suggest? How would you, personally, respond?

Well Jesus gets mad? Did you notice that? We don’t often see anger as an emotional response from our Lord, do we? It’s certainly not something we usually expounded on in church! Jesus is the One filled with compassion, right! Jesus is love, and love is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, not proud or rude, and it’s certainly not irritable (1 Corinthians 13)! Jesus is filled with all of Spiritual Gifts mentioned in Galatians 5; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control!

But here, Jesus clearly gets mad! He is so mad, in fact, that He even calls these dignitaries names! “You Hypocrites”, He says! Does that surprise you? Obviously, there is something about this encounter that has really rubbed Him the wrong way! ...So, is there a take-home lesson here, for those of us who might “criticize” how others experience God?

“If you are going to eat,” the experts say, “then you need to wash your hands before you do. And if you are going to cook, then the utensils that you use must be properly washed, and in a Ceremonial way! You need to obey the Laws of Moses. And you need to obey them “To the Letter”! In other words, if you are going to cook a Turkey, then you need to cut the legs off, and roast them in a pan of their own! That’s the way we do it! That’s the way we’ve done it for years! That’s the way we were taught, by our fathers and mother, our fore-fathers and fore-mothers! That’s what’s right!

And yah, it seems absurd! But how often do we do the very same thing? Think about decorating the church at Christmas time, or decorating your home. Picture Labor Day weekend, or Memorial Day, or your annual Family Reunion! Think about how your family plays these out! Picture your work week, or your weekend, or even your average day! Picture Sunday morning! We all have traditions, don’t we, a way that we do things. And most people tend to resist change, or even fight it tooth and nail, especially when it comes to changing something that feels so dear to them, so right! And when it comes to our faith, to the things of ultimate importance, to the church, our faith, we tend to do it in spades!

And there is wisdom in that, to a degree. Or at least there can be. Huge amounts of wisdom, sometimes. You certainly don't tear down a fence until you know why it was put there in the first place! But what happens when we lose sight of the "why", and instead, focus solely on the "what", or the "how"? What happens when we just "go through the motions", without any meaning behind it? And what happens when those "motions"—or worse, just paying lip service to those "motions—become a stumbling block for others on their journey to God?

Is it the "Letter of the Law" that takes precedence, or the "Spirit of the Law", the "Intent"? What matters? Learned, and good-hearted folks might disagree! I get that! I even encourage that! Dialog helps us grow and learn! But that is the place, in today's text, where Jesus takes issue?

"You bunch of hypocrites," He says! That's not neutral language, is it? "You honor God with your mouths, but your hearts are far away". You pay lip service to your faith! You are just going through the motions! You are acting as if you believe—and here is the crux of the matter—but then, you live your life as if you do not! You are missing the point!

You act as if you are all "up and pious", He says! You publically proclaim a strict adherence to the rules, all the rules, or at least the rules that don't seem to apply to you! You claim Jesus as Lord! But in truth, you have "let go of the Commands of God, and are now clinging to the traditions of men"! Isaiah was right about you! Your Worship is in vain!

Did you realize that obeying “your interpretation” of God’s Word, instead of obeying God’s Word, has a name? It’s called idolatry. So, is obeying the Letter of the Law then, versus the Spirit of the Law, the Intent of the Law, indeed hypocrisy?

I can see why Jesus got so mad, can’t you? The Pharisees have added in all kinds of personal interpretations, their own rules. And now, these religious types are all hung up on procedures! And we as self-righteous disciples tend to sit right here and shake our heads in dismay—all smug maybe, with our arms crossed over our chests, saying “Yah! You tell them Jesus! Take that you Fools! You are just a bunch of Hypocrites!” Right? But then the Lord turns, and glances over at us!

How many times do we cause more harm than good, simply because we think we are doing the right thing! Or worse, how much harm do we cause talking about doing the right thing, but then not actually doing it! How many times do we try to force others to do what we feel is right, because their particular type of behavior pricks our consciousness? But then, we go and do something else that might prick theirs?

Isn’t that the biggest complaint we hear from people outside of the church, that we Christians are a bunch of hypocrites? Aren’t we often accused of just “going through the motions”? And isn’t that indictment sometimes warranted? One of the primary voiced reasons people usually give for not wanting anything to do with organized religion is hypocrisy! So, do we have any “ritual washing” that is getting in the way? Do you?

A man had just attended church, but on the way home, he fussed about everything. He fussed about the sermon, the weather, even the traffic. He fussed about the length of time it took to get their food at the restaurant. When it came, though, the man asked his family to bow their heads in a Prayer of Thanksgiving. His son watched the entire post-church experience. And just as they began to eat he said, “Daddy, did God hear you when we left church today, and you started fussing about the sermon and the weather and the traffic?” The father blushed and said, “Yes son, He heard me.” “And, Daddy, did God hear you just now as you prayed, thanking Him for blessing us?” “Why yes son, he did. He...He heard me.” “Then Daddy, which one do you think God believes?”

“Hypocrite” is a strong word, isn’t it! It comes from the ancient Greek stage, where an actor would wear a large “smiling mask” to quote comedy lines, as the audience roared with laughter—and then slip backstage and grab a “frowning mask”, coming back quoting tragic lines, as the audience moaned and wept! Maybe you’ve seen those masks still used today in movie logos? That “Thespian”, that traveling actor, was called a *hypocritos*, “one who wears a mask”. So, my question is; “How often do we, as believers, wear a mask?” Do other people see a “change of face”, depending on our mood, or situation?

Think about that. Would it be easy to take me seriously if I stood up here wearing a Halloween mask? What if our Elders lived blatantly sinful lives, and then expounded on Christian virtues? Would it be difficult to follow their spiritual guidance?

What if all of us, as believers, just went through the motions of our faith? What if we only paid lip service to God? What if I only showed up for church occasionally, or gossiped about others, or complained? What if I were judgmental, as opposed to loving? Do you think those watching would want to come to Christ?

We proclaim Holy Things as a people of Faith, Eternal things! The question is, do we then go and live our lives as if “today” is the only thing that matters? Do we do things that are far from Holy? If we don’t live what we understand to be a Biblical World View, then why should anyone else take it seriously? Why should they take us seriously? Wouldn’t we then just be playing a role, wearing a mask? Wouldn’t we then be hypocrites? I mean, if we claim that Jesus is our Lord, then don’t we need to do what He tells us to do, each and every thing that He tells us to do, not just the things that we like, or the things that we agree with, or make us comfortable?

Psychologists suggest that people tend to get something in their head, a thought or an idea. They hear something, or read something, and then it travels, either metaphorically or actually, down into their heart, where they start believing it, or become impassioned by it. Then, over time, it starts to spew forth, out their mouths, and into their lives! First you think it, they say, in your head. Then you believe it in your heart. And then you spread it to others, giving it power by what you say and do!

“Everyone should be quick to listen,” says James “slow to speak, and slow to become angry”. Good advice, huh, especially if your mission is to point to Jesus! “Get rid of all moral filth,” he continues, “and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the Word planted in you. Do not merely listen to the Word,” he says “and so deceive yourself. Do what it says!”

That’s what Jesus is saying as well. It is not the rituals or the rules, or the traditions that make you righteous in sight of God! It’s not saying the right things, or even doing the right things, at least not if you are just going through the motions! It’s what’s inside of your heart that counts! The things that make you impure in eyes of God are; evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly! So, empty out the bad, He says, and fill-up on the good! In other words, “Live like a Believer”! Don’t just hear the Word! Do what it says!

Do what you know to be right! Yah! Amen! But don’t worry so much about that speck in your neighbor’s eye! Instead, concentrate on the log in your own! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

It has been a big week Lord, a week of trials and tribulations for some, and for others a week of rejoicing. Some people are holding on by their finger nails right now, struggling through their days, carrying burdens that are much too heavy to bear alone. While others are feeling very blessed right now, like they have been given far more than they deserve. Some of us are trusting in you for answers Lord, and some simply waiting for a glimpse. But all of us, Lord, have come before your Throne of Grace today, together. No matter who we are, or where we are, we are confident of “whose” we are. And we humbly bow before you now.

O Holy God, we thank you for this church, and for our family and friends. We thank you for the harvest, the bounty, our blessings, even when they are less than we desire. We thank you for our jobs, Lord, and for time away from them. We thank you for this great nation of ours, and for its leaders, past, present and future. And we thank you in advance for all that you will do, in the days and weeks and years ahead.

We also place before you some of the concerns that are troubling our hearts right now, and some of the people. We lift up..... Enable those of us who are standing, Lord, to help those who are doubled over in grief and pain. Equip those who are smiling to share that smile with those who are not. And give to those who are feeling you close right now, the ability to touch those who are feeling lost and alone. We ask these things in Jesus’ Name as we pray now the very prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...