

"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above. Coming down from God..."

(James 1:17) "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." (NRSV)

This is a clear warning to Christians that we must not let our religion become only a "spectator sport." It is too easy for Christians to attend a worship service, watch the "action" or be lulled by the sermon, and then go on our merry way without any more real thought as to what God might want in terms of our time, our abilities, our work, whether or not we reach out to others...in other words, our "walk."

I find this scripture from James particularly provoking as I hear all the politicians making promises about how they can make things better for our country and how the other contender for whatever office is in focus is not as good or is even BAD. It makes me sick, even as I am still thankful that the United States is a democracy where changes in our leadership are usually made in a fairly orderly way even if not with much love or peace or good will. Promises, promises.... Most of us pretty well know to turn a deaf ear to political promises these days, I guess. Integrity does not seem to be high on the list of things important to today's candidates. But as I point my finger at the politicians, I wonder whether we actually view our OWN promises as Christians pretty much the same way, not to be taken seriously, or taken out of storage for the Sunday worship hour but generally ignored the rest of the week? Do we have integrity in our walk as those who say we are trying to follow Jesus??

A man was asked about his faith, and gave this reply: "I give God one Sunday hour every other week. As long as I do that, God doesn't bother me and I won't bother God. This way I cover my bases without this God-stuff messing up my enjoyment of life."

Professor/preacher/bishop William Willimon told of his painful discovery of the disparity between a Christian's "talk" and a Christian's "walk." "I remember my own youthful disillusionment when, one summer during my college years, I worked for a man whom I admired greatly, a man in my church who, at least at church, seemed to be an exemplary Christian. I considered it a great honor to be hired to work in a business that was operated on the basis of Christian virtues.

"Unfortunately, when I worked at his place of business -seeing him daily harass employees, ruthlessly put down employees, and advance employees who were white and not advance those who were of color- I learned an important and painful lesson. We don't always embody, in our lives, what we say we believe. The gap between our verbal expressions of faith and our actions can be terribly wide." (from Pulpit Resource - edited by fte)

It's always been that way. The Pharisees of Jesus' day knew the scriptures backwards and forwards, and they sought to teach them to others and to enforce adherence to them. They wanted to serve God. But they were so locked into their own understandings that they lost sight of the *spirit* of the law, the reason God had given the law to God's people in the first place: because God loved them and wanted to give them a way to walk with God in all areas of their lives....

James wrote to the early church people: “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.” (James 1:26-27)

What we DO as people who claim to follow Jesus Christ matters! We either witness to Christ’s love and mercy to others, or we don’t. Every single day, each of us makes that choice..

The religious authorities were offended that Jesus’ disciples were not washing their hands according to Jewish law. These days, we know the importance of hand-washing. Hospitals, grocery stores, and lots of public buildings often have hand sanitizers available... The reason for it? To prevent the spread of disease. The reason for the laws in Jesus’ day? Perhaps God had similar purpose in mind, but the laws were also to provide tangible, all-through-the-day ways for people to remember that they belonged to the Holy God. God had a claim on every aspect of their lives.

Unfortunately, as with everything else God has given us, these practices were sometimes carried out without real regard for God or other people. I may wash my hands ten times a day so that I can say I’m holier than you are. I might pray louder and longer to try to make you think that I am really religious.... It’s easy to let the practice of religious laws or the words of religion become almost a god, instead of a *way to remember* that we belong to GOD.

In today’s Gospel lesson, the religious folks had the forms down just fine. They knew that hands were supposed to be washed, they knew how cups were supposed to be washed and how things were supposed to be prepared.... They criticized Jesus’ followers for not adhering strictly to the proper procedures. Jesus chastised them, quoting Isaiah 29:13: “These people, says God, honor me with their words but not with their hearts. You put aside the teachings of God and obey rules created by your ancestors in the desert.” Jesus accused them of more than simply empty ritual; he accused them of having empty words, words where they gave lip-service to God but no love. This is one of the greatest dangers a Christian can face, where we go through the motions as Christians, saying the words, even going through some of the actions, but letting them be only empty words or actions, and not letting our hearts really be offered to God.

Sometimes it takes a crisis for us to do this. Several years ago I spoke with a young woman whose recent diagnosis with colon cancer had forced her into trying to sort out her faith. Raised in the church, she'd been away from it for more than twenty years. Confronted with a challenging prognosis, her faith had been shaken, her prayers had intensified, and, as she said, she was trying to figure out what she had to do to get God to help her get well. "What do I have to promise God, what do I have to DO, to convince God that my life is worth saving?"

We do well to look in the mirror, long and hard. God has blessed us by giving us life and also by offering to each one of us the opportunity to be part of God’s good giving to this world.... We are asked to let the Spirit of God lead us to carry out good works: to show love to those who are powerless, to offer forgiveness to those who don’t expect it or deserve it, and to work hard to let God have a say in our “walk” as well as our “talk.”

Baptist preacher/college professor Tony Campolo has often been criticized by his conservative colleagues over the years for his repeated call for compassion for gay and lesbian people. We hear Tony's heart in his words: "They complain because they do not understand that I am trying to make up for an incredible failure during my high-school days. There was a boy in our school named Roger. He was gay. We knew about it. We spread the word on him, and we made his life miserable. When we passed him in the hall, we would call out his name in an effeminate manner. We made him the brunt of a lot of cheap jokes. On Fridays after phys ed class, we would go into the showers, but Roger never would; he was afraid to, and for good reason. When we came out of the showers we would take our wet towels and whip them at him. We thought it was a fun thing to do.

"I wasn't there the day they took Roger, dragged him into the shower room, and shoved him into the corner. Folded up in a fetal position, he cried as five guys urinated all over him. That night Roger went home and went to bed early. They said it was about two o'clock the next morning when he got up and went down to the basement— and hung himself. When they told me, I realized that I wasn't a Christian. Oh, I believed all the right stuff. I was as theologically sound as any evangelical could expect to be. I knew what I was supposed to believe and I believed it intensely, but I had not yet yielded myself and allowed God's Holy Spirit to transform me into the kind of person I ought to be. If the Holy Spirit had been in me, I would have stood up for Roger. When the guys came to make fun of him, I would have put one arm around Roger's shoulders and said, 'Leave him alone. He's my friend. Don't mess with him.' But I was afraid to be his friend. I was afraid to stand up for Roger, because I knew that if you stand up for somebody like Roger, folks may treat you badly, too. So I kept my distance, and I failed to be the loving person that Christ wanted me to be. The work of God's Holy Spirit was not evident in my life. If it had been, Roger might be alive today." (*Let Me Tell You A Story*, pp. 48-49)

The Word given to us through Jesus Christ and through the entire Bible is that, in God's sight, every person is worth saving, and that means even us. The Gospel is the declaration that God loves us all and desires that we, in return, love God and love each other. Jesus proclaimed, in the midst of a religious system that declared certain people to be unworthy, that God is interested in seeking and saving the "lost," the overlooked, and the powerless. *Nobody* is outside the boundary of God's love or concern. And NOTHING can separate any of us from the love of God in Christ Jesus!

When somebody dies and we stand at the grave-side, the usual liturgy from Revelation 14 goes like this: "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they rest from their labors, and their works follow them." (Rev. 14:13) God asks us to let our lives be part of Christ's love made visible in this world. It's our choice whether we drift through life as spectators, letting our identity as Christians essentially mean very little, or live out our lives as those who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, really, as do-ers of His Word.

That's the Word we have been given, and that's the Word we are asked to make visible – each one of us – as we let God's Holy Spirit show us how to become doers- sharers of God's love today, in our world, in our lives, in our community, in the time we have been given. May our walk honor Jesus Christ. Amen.