

Lord, open our ears to hear your Word spoken to us; Open our hearts to be changed by Your Spirit. Amen.

"Put your money where your mouth is."
"Talk is cheap." "Get real." "She's just paying lip service."
"You gonna talk the talk, you better walk the walk."

We all know people we'd like to say that to,
people who know how to look like they're good as gold,
or how to say the right thing to get ahead. We call them hypocrites.
No. 1 complaint about, or religious people – they're hypocrites.
"I would go to church, if it weren't for all the hypocrites."
My favorite answer is, "There's always room for one more... "
Religious life attracts hypocrites like a honey jar attracts ants –
That's where the Pharisees got stuck, trying to be perfect –
and then they'd blow it by being so proud of how perfect they were.

Jesus didn't have much use for their pride – Jesus wasn't promoting religion.
Jesus was promoting a relationship with God, the kind of relationship
that is so close there is no room for hiding who we are.
I hope each of us has had at least one relationship like that –
with someone who knows us and loves us and accepts every part of us.
If we could only see God as one who loves us that way – who knows more than we
do about the good, the bad and the ugly in us – and wants us to stay close.
When we can see God that way, know God that way
we don't feel any need to "talk a good game" or show off.

I'm guessing that the Pharisees Jesus was talking to didn't have any sense
of God as an "abba," a daddy who knows and loves them.
They were big into trying to please and appease, toe the line.
If what God wants is toeing the line, they were champions.
But Jesus tells them they've missed the point. They're majoring in minors.
Many passages in their own prophets said the same thing:
"God doesn't want your rituals and sacrifices;
God wants your hearts filled with compassion."

Jesus says, “Don’t worry so much about keeping kosher and washing up correctly.

Never mind the externals – God is looking at what’s inside.”

And it’s on our insides that the “good, the bad, and the ugly” duke it out.

You know, when someone has to say, “But I’m a good person...”

they are arguing with an internal voice that says they’re not.

That’s why we confess “sinfulness” more than specific “sins.”

We can usually discipline ourselves to do and say the right thing.

But the condition we can’t do anything about on our own is the general

sinfulness that lives in us along with everything that is bright and beautiful.

We’re a mixed bag. And the way out is not “trying harder,” or

“putting up appearances,” but being real. Really real.

Really really, real, like people are in 12-step rooms.

James has a similar message.

Don’t just say the “right thing,” the thing you’re supposed to say, the thing that will make others think you’re pious and concerned. Walk the walk.

We can’t say, “Oh, isn’t too bad that people are homeless,” if we’re not going to do anything. We can’t say, “Oh, I wish the rest of the world had enough to eat and Covid vaccines,” when we waste stockpiles of both.

Does each one of us have to solve homelessness and inequality of resources?

No... each one of us has a responsibility to act as the Spirit leads us.

And if we’re not even asking the Spirit what she would have us do, we’re like people who look at ourselves in the mirror and don’t really see ourselves.

As someone once said, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

Both James and Jesus are clear – evidence that we’re in a relationship with God shows up in how we treat the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten, the neglected, the falsely accused... even the rightly accused.

God doesn’t want us to feed the hungry out of a sense of duty or obligation.

God wants us to feed the hungry because we know God has fed us, and we want others to know that love.

God doesn’t want us to help Afghan refugees because it’s the right thing to do;

God wants us to help refugees because we know that it is by accident of birth and good fortune that we are safe and warm and clothed, and we want others to have that kind of security.

God doesn't want us to work to undo systems of white supremacy that privilege us because we feel guilty – God wants us to want everyone to have the same access to privilege and security we do.

God wants us to want everyone to be safe on our streets, have a home and enough to eat, because that reflects God's love for the world he came to save.

God wants us to care from the heart.

When we act out of a sense of obligation, we are in the business of meeting needs. Fine business – not the business of the church, the community of Christ-followers.

Our business is– and here I'm quoting Dwight Zscheile's excellent book, *People of the Way*, "Our business is to follow "the energy of the Holy Spirit as it (*sic*) moves in the midst of our churches and neighborhoods, creating and restoring community, challenging patterns of injustice, and bringing peace."¹

When we become aware of how loved we are, that becomes our motivation.

Sara Miles is a writer and a chef, who spent many years as a radical in New York and Central America before moving to San Francisco.

Church was no part of her world –

she saw it as a society of hypocrites with no relation whatsoever to her life.

But one Sunday she found herself walking into a church in her neighborhood, an unusually creative Episcopal church in San Francisco called St. Gregory of Nyssa. As she followed the movement of the liturgy and people – and they actually move there, dancing from one space for the service of the Word, to another for the Eucharist – she found herself standing in the crowd around their big round altar. As they shared communion, someone handed her a piece of bread and she ate it – and found herself experiencing Jesus, real, alive.

She had no category for a real, alive Jesus; she thought he was just a guy in a book.

Her story of coming into a relationship with Jesus, and with his much messier family, the church, is told movingly in her book *"Take this Bread."*

What I want to highlight today is how she began to notice more and more the disjuncture between this meal her church shared on Sundays around the altar, and the real hunger in the neighborhood in which the church sat.

She became part of an effort to create a food bank in the neighborhood and realized the church was the perfect place to host it.

¹¹ Dwight J. Zscheile, *People of the Way: Renewing Anglican Identity* (2012, Morehouse Publishing), p. 99

It was hard work getting the vestry to agree –
all the fine words and scripture were one thing,
but letting the homeless and hungry right into your beautiful sanctuary?
Using your one-of-a-kind carved and polished altar table to serve food,
not just eucharist? But that is just what they did.
In fact, in addition to the food pantry open on a weekday, the church began to
clear the altar after the service was over and serve a community meal there.
That's what coffee hour became. That was "following the energy of the Holy
Spirit as it moves in the midst of our churches and neighborhoods, creating
and restoring community, challenging patterns of injustice, and bringing peace."

It's not that "being good" has no place – what counts is how we get there.
Getting there on our own efforts is religion.
Getting there through the love of God, in which we can be real about who we are
and still loved – that's relationship.
That's freedom, that's grace, that's God's perfect gift for us,
not the nitpicking of "thou shalt nots," but the perfect law, the law of freedom,
which is what we get when we're conscious of being in relationship with the
God who knows us, loves us, and does not turn away from us.
Then we find ourselves making choices that are "good" because being known
and loved is such a huge gift, we want to respond in goodness.
That's the story Sara Miles tells, not the story of "How I started a food bank in
a church." The story of "How I learned I was loved beyond my wildest
imagining and it changed me and my community."

Where do you detect the energy of the Holy Spirit moving in your church,
your neighborhood, your world?
Because the Holy Spirit is on the move – here and in our home communities.
When we're moving with the Spirit, God's wind in our sail, there is no stopping us.
Prepare to be blessed – and to be a blessing.

Amen.

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. 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.**

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone **be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.** 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.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. **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.**

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.

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, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 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.) 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?" He 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; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'

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

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."