

**September 1, 2024**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Abbey Church**

**Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

One classic Protestant tactic in the apologetics “wars” is to assert that whatever is said of Pharisees in the Gospels is applicable to Catholics. Protestants are on the side of the prophetic Saint Paul, who knows that Christ has done away with the Law and all its precepts; Papists, on the other hand, are stuck in a pharisaical system of liturgical rituals, sacraments, and man-made rules, “teaching as doctrines human precepts” and disregarding God’s commandment, clinging instead to human traditions (Mark 7:7-8).

Traces of this “prophet vs. precept” thinking are also evident in the popular claim, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” The Protestant insistence on the individual’s acceptance of Jesus Christ as “*my personal* Lord and Savior” inevitably minimizes community. As Reformed theology and practice often suggest, the Body of Christ is ultimately “just” a mystical metaphor, and Church unity is located on the spiritual plane, not in any rigid institution; even church-going is ultimately optional, left to the individual to decide when and how to worship. The rituals of Popery and the rules of the institutional Catholic Church, on the other hand, are lumped together as merit-based schemes we have created to earn our way to Heaven.

Should you ever encounter this line of reasoning, you should point out that both Jesus and Paul never denounced the natural law, or good virtuous deeds, or human traditions. They assert, rather, that God has orchestrated a new way of entering into the divine life – through the teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus does not teach that all human traditions are now worthless; he simply centers them on himself rather than the Torah. As one example that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill the Law of Moses, St. Mark notes that the Jews would purify – literally, *baptize* – their “cups and jugs and kettles” (Mark 7:4) before drinking from them. Jesus asks his disciples to baptize not cups and jugs and kettles, but people – externally pouring water upon them in order to effect an internal purification of the soul. This is the sacramental logic of the Church: what happens externally produces the change internally; the covenant Jesus establishes is new because it presupposes and builds upon the old!

The denunciation of ritual and the exaltation of one's private faith, to return to the Protestant apologetic, is also a caricature of religion rightly understood. The letter of St. James, "a letter of straw" and of less dignity than other New Testament books, according to Martin Luther, underscores the fact that religion entails external exemplary behavior, ritual worship, and charity toward the neighbor: "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 word "religion" itself, if one prevalent theory is to be trusted, highlights this very point: *Religio* would be derived from *re* + *ligare* – to bind or connect back: yourself to God. All of humanity needs a way to restore a connection with the divine that has been severed, fractured, broken. And the biblical witness of Genesis and St. Paul reminds us that no weak and limited individual can presume to do the re-binding on his own; some external guide must point out the way back to union.

I think most of you are perfectly aware of this; if you consider yourselves "spiritual but not religious," you likely wouldn't be here today – you'd prefer to glorify God by sleeping in on a Sunday morning!

We must, indeed, resist the accusation that Catholics are modern-day Pharisees, just as we must resist the temptation to rest in some self-made assurance that we are saved simply because we have faith.

But we must heed the warning that Jesus preaches to the Pharisees, understanding that it directly targets us as well. The very hypocrisy that Jesus denounces in the Pharisees' observance later in the Gospel is an ever-lurking temptation for us: we might be inclined to focus much effort on the punctilious observance of Church customs and rules and lament the failings of others to keep "the tradition of our elders," neglecting the basic duties of fraternal charity and the works of mercy.

In this regard, the letter of St. James offers tremendous words of caution to Christians then as now: "Be doers of the word and not hearers only" (James 1:22). It is not enough to espouse the orthodox teaching of the Church and minimize her social doctrine; orthodoxy and orthopraxy need and animate each other; the two are meant to be united, since interior belief reveals itself in external practice as, to quote St. Paul, "faith working through charity" (Galatians 5:6). In this regard, St. John Henry Newman chimes in with a helpful note: "...for he who cultivates only one precept of the Gospel to the exclusion of the rest, in reality attends to no part at all."

But why is the unity of the inner and outer man so essential for the Christian life? Once again, St. James offers a beautiful answer. (I will read literally between the lines of the second reading passage selected for today's Mass that skips over several wonderful sentences; when you see Mass readings that jump over verses, there's often good homiletic material in the omitted in-between ones!) Immediately following verse 22, which reads, "Be doers of the word and not hearers only," St. James adds in verses 23-25, "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like. But the one who peers into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres, and is not a hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, such a one shall be blessed in what he does."

With the fascinating reflection on the mirror in the moral life, James is certainly not exhorting us to narcissism; he wants us, rather, to be mindful of the image we carry within us and reveal to the world. We behold the image of Christ when we observe ourselves in the mirror – both the mirror of conscience and even looking at our physical appearance. Awareness of that dignity is a beautiful privilege that only we can deprive ourselves of by sin and despair. Because we image God by virtue of our baptism, the image of God dwells within us, and therefore Christ Himself dwells in us and wishes to be revealed to others through our words and actions. Perhaps an echo of this logic is at work in Jesus' new covenant teaching: food entering the body does not defile the person. The internal thoughts and impulses of lust and greed and idolatry and pride defile us, tainting the image of God within and prompting us to taint that same image in others with our bodies, words, and deeds. Thanks be to God, then, that our Catholic religion invites us to purify both the internal and the external – both can be purified, because Christ desires to dwell within us no matter what we have done or thought or said, and it is he who comes to our aid in polishing His very image within us.