

Pastor Jon's Sermon from Sunday, August 29, 2021.

Text: James 1:17-27 and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

What do you practice?

This is the question an Eastern Indian boy asks on YouTube? He continues, "Because what you practice, you will get very good at. He asks, "Do you practice joy in your life? Do you practice peace in your life? Do you practice happiness in your life? Or do you practice complaining? If you practice complaining, you will get very good at it. You will get so good at it... that you will complain about everything.

So, what do you practice? I practice trying to be a good dad, husband, pastor, and golfer. But like my golf game, there is lots of room for improvement in all areas of life. With all the stress and uncertainty in our world with Covid, it's tough to feel like you are doing anything really well.

Do you consider yourself someone who practices religion? What does that mean anyway?

The book of James mentions religion in our reading today... one of a few places "religion" even comes up in the Bible.

The English word religion comes from the latin word *ligare*: to join, or link, classically understood to mean the linking of human and divine. The same root is used for the word ligament.

Religion literally means to re- tie, fasten, or bind yourself... in this case to God.

So practicing religion has a sense of binding or tying ourselves to God over and over again through things like the word and sacrament, and worship. This in turn should send out into the world on behalf of others.

According to our lessons today from James and Mark, religion is to be more about our actions than our words or shows of outward of piety. It's not just about looking the part, following human traditions, saying

the right words, or gaining your personal salvation. It is about how we live our daily lives in response to the Good news of Jesus.

Luther didn't particularly like the book of James because it was Gospel "light." He called it the straw gospel. He felt it leaned toward works righteousness for our salvation more than the good news of Jesus Christ.

However, in our lesson for today, these commands makes sense to me. We need to hear the law in order to convict us of our sin and drive us to foot of the cross.

James says that anything we do, any generous act of giving first comes from God and is attached to our faith and baptism. Our actions are to be a first fruits in response to what God has done for us in Christ.

Then he gets into the law... we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. And to be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

James says in 1:26-27, "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." I love it when the Bible is straight forward.

Our religion shouldn't be something we keep for ourselves... but should translate into action of caring for the most vulnerable in our society. Widows and orphans were the most vulnerable in Jesus time. Who are the most vulnerable today?

John Pavlovich. Former mega church evangelical pastor and now author and speaker says it this way in an article he wrote this week reflecting on these lessons. Someone shared this in our Wednesday Bible study. He asks the question: "How do you know if you have the wrong religion?"

"Since beginning this work as a pastor nearly three decades ago. I've encountered millions of people of faith who believe religion is a hard pass-fail, and they are terrified of flunking.

The right religious worldview is the one that makes you a more empathetic human being—period. It is the belief system that enables you to be more aware of the suffering in the world and propels you into other people’s lives to alleviate that suffering.

If your religion doesn’t yield an ever-deepening compassion in you and move you to widen your embrace of disparate humanity, it’s the wrong religion. I don’t care what your pastor, priest, rabbi, imam, guru, or prophet says. Believing the right thing isn’t the right thing unless your life shows the fruit. Less generosity, less empathy, less diversity means you got it wrong.”

He has a new book coming out book [‘If God is Love, Don’t Be a Jerk.’](#)

Finally, in our Gospel, Jesus is accusing the Pharisees and Scribes of putting the appearance of religious piety before true obedience to the commandment of God to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus even called the Pharisees and Scribes hypocrites... or literally stage actors... people who praise God with their lips but without action. I feel convicted by Jesus words, because my faith doesn’t always result in action.

But there is grace for us. Jesus didn’t wait for us to get it right before coming to earth to save us. In our Gospel, Jesus defended those who didn’t always look the part or act religious. He ate with everyone and didn’t check ID’s at the door.

Today, Jesus welcomes us to his table just as we are and offers us forgiveness and grace to keeping trying to put our faith in action.

Amen!