Dear Friends,

"Buckle up your seat belts. It’s the Law." As Americans we unconsciously “buckle up” because we do not want to get a traffic ticket. So often the determination of our actions is based on whether we will be punished, not on what is right or wrong. “Drive as if your children lived here” make us think of speed in a different way. The sign is inviting us to go a notch higher than the law and have concern for the lives of children.

Now the first reading for this Sunday from the Book of Deuteronomy speaks about the laws that God gave to the people of Israel in terms of his love for them. The Israelites did not view these laws as impositions from above that had to be followed to avoid punishment. They saw the law as a personal expression of God’s love for them. “What great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord Our God is to us when we call on him?” The people of Israel had a personal relationship with God. They knew that he cared for them. His laws were an expression of his love. They kept the law to return his love.

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus and the Pharisees have a public fight about the Jewish tradition of washing hands before dinner. Jesus puts the Pharisees and their tradition down with a scathing denunciation. He calls the Pharisees “hypocrites,” who have God on their lips but not in their hearts. The pious practices per se, were not bad. What Christ opposed was the attitude of Pharisees that such formal and merely external actions constituted a person’s religiosity. It is worse when these were done for display or to show to the people how pious they were. In other words, the real intent of the law has been lost for the sake of merely keeping the ritual.

When the Pharisees ask Jesus why his disciples did not keep the tradition of handwashing, their question is not a request for information. The issue that the Pharisees had with Jesus’ disciples was not about their hygiene. It is a challenge to Jesus’ whole ministry. From the point of view of the Pharisees, a person couldn’t be from God and not wash his hands before dinner in accordance with the tradition. The practice itself of washing hands for ritualistic purification is what Jews then and today call the n’tilat-yadayim, which is done to remove impurities that you may have acquired by touching ceremonially impure things, such as products in the marketplace. To perform the n’tilat-yadayim, you would simply rinse your hands all the way up to the wrists with water. Why? Because your home is your temple and your dining table is your altar and the food on it is your sacrifice and you are the priest (cohen). Therefore, being that the Tanakh requires the cohanim to be ceremonially pure before offering sacrifices on the Temple altar, the Oral Torah requires the same before eating a meal.

Jesus challenges them that it is not the ritual purification of hands, cups, kettles, etc., although this is important also for sanitary purposes, a person is guaranteed an interior purification. Rather, it is not through this ritual that makes this person clean or unclean. But rather, the heart of morality is no other than the heart of a person which is pure in disposition toward God and His people. That is why Jesus says to the Pharisees by quoting Isaiah’s prophecy: “These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines mere human precepts,” (vv. 6-7).

The motivation for our actions as Christians must be hearts full of love. Performing actions without love is just paying God lip service. What matters is the motivation of our actions. What matters is what is inside of us. Sin springs from hatred and selfishness within a person and takes its expression in the terrible actions enumerated at the end of the Gospel reading, fornication, murder, theft, adultery, etc. Virtue springs from hearts full of the love of God and responds with charity, kindness, and upright decent behavior.

Be blessed,
Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.
FIRST READING
In your observance of the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin upon you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. (Dt 4:2)

PSALM
The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord. (Ps 15)

SECOND READING
Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. (Jas 1:22)

GOSPEL
“You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.” (Mk 7:8)


GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

Albert Einstein said that the “true measure of intelligence is not knowledge but imagination.” Being a disciple of Jesus Christ requires a great deal of imagination. It is not enough to simply attend to facts, rules and rituals and consider the job done. Quite contrarily, the Gospels demands creativity, of trying to discern how to put flesh on the Beatitudes and properly serve God’s children. Jesus never doled out a top down agenda. Not once did he ever demand conformity over conversion or sacrifice over mercy. The Gospel is always about putting people in touch with their compassionate, forgiving, and unconditionally loving God and meeting them where they are.

For Jesus, it often meant breaking a few rules. Well respected and time-honored traditions had to be set aside in order to attend to what really mattered. God’s compassion, mercy and true conversion were always the trump cards. The story of the Good Samaritan, healing on the Sabbath, and bypassing of purification rituals all display this theme. Human beings can get too hung up on protocol and tradition. This is so much so that often preserving all of these things is of greater concern than the beggar knocking on our door or the sinner looking for mercy. It is no wonder, then, that we can easily become hypocritical. Many can see us on our knees in prayer while our true heart and actions, rooted in judgment and self-preservation, are hidden from others. It is a trap into which we can easily fall. Who cares how we live our lives as long as our hands are properly washed!

Here enters the need for imagination and the distinction of truly being a wise and intelligent person. It takes a good measure of creativity and a lot of guts to really be a doer of God’s word and not merely a hearer. Being a person who doesn’t just tell people about God but shows people God requires courage and ingenuity. That’s why people like St. Francis of Assisi and St. Teresa of Calcutta are timeless. Their genuineness speaks volumes generation to generation. It’s risky business taking the step to allow God into our hearts. Permitting God to release us from the grip of our evil thoughts, infidelity, greed, malice, sexual improprieties, licentiousness, envy, arrogance, folly, and the like takes courage. That’s why we prefer to spend our energy rearranging the future rather than take measures to secure a foundation that is most certainly crumbling.
The first reading, Dt 4:1 - 2, 6 - 8

In the fifth century BC, internal corruption and external pressures had brought the Israelites to the brink of extinction. Kings, priests, prophets, and Temple had failed to hold them together. Deuteronomy, recorded under the Holy Spirit’s direction during the crisis of the Babylonian exile, 587-539 BC, presented the ancient legal traditions surrounding the Law which had been given Israel by the Lord God through Moses. In this book, Moses described the beauty of the Law and commanded its observance as Israel’s sign of gratitude for the Lord God’s promise of the land. He assured the people that their God-given Law (with their faithful observance of it), would serve three purposes: a) it would help Israel survive as a people; b) it would make the people proud of their God and His Covenant; and c) it would make neighboring nations marvel at the graciousness and justice of the God of Israel, at His closeness to His people, and at their closeness to Him.

The second reading James 1:17 - 18, 21 - 22, 27

Today we begin a series of five Sunday readings from the letter of James. In this letter, James addresses the whole Christian Church in general, rather than speaking just to a particular community or person as Paul did in his letters. After dealing with the value of trials and temptations and refuting the argument that temptations come from God (James 1:2-18), James provides the only formal definition of religion in the Bible. He defines true religion as translating the love of God into deeds of loving kindness toward the vulnerable members of the community and putting into practice the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. More specifically, true religion means that one is to “care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Widows and orphans epitomize need since a fatherless family has no tangible means of support (Deut 27:19; Sir 4:10). This is coupled with remaining undefiled by the world (used here in its unredeemed sense, in opposition to God). These two examples (v27) constitute “pure and undefiled religion,” not in an exhaustive sense but as integral to any authentic expression of Christian belief.

Gospel Insights

Jesus in today’s gospel takes issue with the legalism of the Pharisees. In so doing he surfaces the ultimate source of sinful conduct, a personal internal spirit. This chapter in Mark (c. 7) deals with Christ’s attitude toward a number of issues: purification ritual (vv1 - 8), human tradition and divine commandments (vv9 - 13), and Jewish food laws (vv18 - 23).

In failing to wash before eating, Jesus’ disciples are in violation of Jewish law (vv1 - 8). Writing for an audience unschooled in Jewish tradition, Mark explains the precept to his readers. Purification rites had become an increasingly important part of the law. What was originally prescribed for Levites only (Num 8) was extended in legal tradition to all Israelites and in a broader form as well. These were detailed unwritten prescriptions stemming from early Jewish teachers and codified by the rabbis. These “traditions of the elders” were eventually given the same weight as the Torah itself. Among such laws were those on the ritual washing of body parts and culinary objects before eating. The failure of the disciples to observe these norms occasions the criticism of Jesus’ opponents. Christ’s reply (vv6f) is a reworked quotation from the Septuagint touching on two aspects of Pharisaic hypocrisy (Gr: hypokrites, a masked actor). The first is the marked emphasis on external conformity (lip service) with no change of heart. The second is the penchant for ranking secondary precepts with the Torah itself. In some cases, divine law is even dismissed in favor of human precept, e.g. the qorban case (7:9 - 13). Jesus states publicly that sin comes not from violations of external observances but rather from evil internal dispositions (vv14f). Later in private conversation with his disciples (v17), he elaborates on this teaching, showing the difference between legalistic ritual and true morality (vv21 - 23). Internal evil manifests itself in single or habitual acts of sinfulness. The evils cited are in large part related to the decalogue, therefore basic in character (Gal 5:19f).
“Oh yes, I believe in God, but I’m not nuts about Him!

A young coed being interviewed on television about her religious beliefs said, “Oh yes, I believe in God, but I’m not nuts about Him!” According to the Gallup Poll that is a good description of how most Americans feel about God. Ninety-four percent of us believe in God. When it comes to translating that belief into action, however, most of us are clearly not nuts about Him. We have something in common with the Pharisees. Jesus once summed up the Pharisees’ chief problem like this: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” — There is a group kin to the traditionalists that we might call Christian Secularists. This group is made up of that host of nominally committed people who fill the rolls of most churches. They bring their children to Sunday School. They use the Church to marry and bury. They visit us at Christmas and at Easter. They are not atheists or agnostics. They, like that young coed, believe in God, but they’re not nuts about him. Today’s Gospel is Christ’s view about such followers.

Jesus, in today’s gospel, inveighs against a legalistic spirit. His Jewish contemporaries were lost in detailed prescriptions and had forgotten the true meaning of religion. Their adherence to external observance often took precedence over faith, or even excluded the fundamental responsibilities of that faith.

As in most things in life, law requires a balanced outlook. Where and when it is necessary, it must be enforced and observed. But it must never suffocate the spirit which leads the Christian above and beyond anything the law might ask (Gal 2:22f). Every law must be evaluated in the light of the greatest law: the love of God and neighbor. Notice how succinctly James summarizes the spirit of religion: holiness of life and care for the needy.

QUIZ TIME

1. What does Moses tell Israel to follow?
   A. A map
   B. His directions
   C. God’s commandments
   D. The Egyptians

2. Whom does every perfect gift come from?
   A. Our parents
   B. Our teachers
   C. Moses
   D. The Father of lights

3. We must not only hear God’s word, but also what?
   A. Write it down
   B. Do what it teaches
   C. Learn the laws of other nations
   D. Translate it into other languages

4. The Pharisees were upset because Jesus’s disciples didn’t do what?
   A. Bow to them
   B. Go to the marketplace
   C. Go to the temple
   D. Wash their hands before eating

5. Which prophet said, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; they teach human traditions as religious laws”?
   A. Isaiah B. Jeremiah C. Joel  D. Daniel

RESOURCES USED WITH PERMISSION FROM FORTNY HOMILIES, SUNDAY WEBSITE – ST LOUIS UNIVERSITY, LPI, SERMON CENTRAL, CATHOLIC BRAIN

QUIZ ANSWERS


1. Discuss some human rights issues that would change if everyone in the world observed the law (love your neighbor)?

2. Have there been times when you just “talked the talk” but did not want to “walk the walk”? Give an example.

3. What changes do we need to make within our family to live with fewer rules and more love!