

Readings

Dt 4:1-2, 6-8

Ps 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5

Jas 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Richie P. Mercado, O.S.A.
*Special Assistant to the Provincial
Chicago, Illinois*

Holiness is a state of being holy, and one of the many ways of approaching holiness is through the eyes of the law. Legally speaking, if one does not break the law, then we can consider one to be holy. Our readings today talk about the commandments of God – the laws, statutes, and decrees that provide order and structure to the lives of those who have a covenantal relationship with God. In order for one to achieve holiness, one has to do more than simply hearing God’s laws. We are called to act on God’s laws in love.

In our first reading, Moses wants to pass on the wisdom that can be found in God’s laws to the people of Israel. He calls on God’s people to keep his commandments if they wish to continue being blessed by God along the way. And if they observe the commandments of God, then they also show to the rest of the world their wisdom that comes from God. And this wisdom that comes from God through the commandments, then, set for the people of Israel a higher moral standard than the rest of the world. God challenged them to treat one another as God treated them with love. Thus, life is not just hearing the commandments of God; life is about observing the commandments of God in love.

St. James echoes this message in our second reading today. He teaches us that we should not get stuck in just hearing the word of God; rather, we should be *doers of the word of God*. We

put love into our actions. We bring compassion with us into our relationships. As St. James says, *“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction.”* In holiness, there has to be an element of compassion, an element of love, an element of care in whatever we do, especially to those who are in the margins. Being called a Christian is not enough. There has to be a component of love in our lives, a love that is shown through our actions.

In our Gospel today, Jesus helps us distinguish between God’s commandments and human tradition as we continue to act on God’s laws in love, as we continue to bring love and compassion into whatever we do. We can see that the Pharisees and Scribes apparently equated these two things. They practiced the human tradition while ignoring the commandments of God. And what we see here are two very different kinds of service to God. And in these two kinds of service to God, it is very clear which one God prefers. On one hand, there are those believers who offer God “lip-service.” These are the ones Jesus starkly criticizes in today’s Gospel, quoting the prophet Isaiah: *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me* (the outside doesn’t match the inside). On the other hand, there are those believers who offer what we might call “heart-service” as opposed to lip-service. People who are doers of the word of God and not hearers only, they are those who have prioritized the word of God from their own hearts and have replaced their own personal plans in life with God’s words.

And after distinguishing both, Jesus clearly warns us that the evil acts come from within and not from the outside. In our journey toward attaining holiness, external piety or not externally breaking the law is not just the sole basis of holiness. Yes, they are necessary; but what is much more important is the heart. What is important is our interior transformation and conversion

because of the word of God. If we are very diligent and faithful to our prayers and we go to Mass regularly but our hearts are filled with bitterness, anger and revenge, what good does that do us? If we have bitterness or anger on the inside, it is going to end up contaminating everything that comes out of us. It will contaminate our personalities and our attitudes, how we treat others, what we say to other people. After all, at the end of our lives, when we are standing in front of our Merciful Judge in the highest court of all, “checking the boxes and not breaking the laws” is not the point of being a Christian. It is about imitating Christ who brings love, compassion, mercy, and kindness to the people around us. We do not make ourselves holy by our actions, by our words. We become holy when we allow God’s Spirit to transform us. Our word and actions should be an expression of the conversion that’s taking place in our hearts on the way to God. There has to be a match between the inside and the outside.

So, let us pray for God’s wisdom, that our hearts may be filled with compassion, love, and care for the people around us – especially the poor, hungry, homeless, rejected, lonely – that we may become men and women of heart. Being called a Christian is not enough. We are called to act on God’s laws in love.