

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

**Sunday closest to August 31**

**Proper 17**

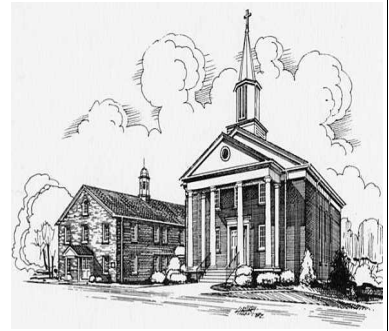
**Year B**

**RCL**

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalms 15

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



The Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

*Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9*

Moses said: So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this

entire law that I am setting before you today?

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

***Psalm 15 Page 599, BCP***

***Domine, quis habitabit?***

- 1 LORD, who may dwell in your tabernacle?  
    who may abide upon your holy hill?
- 2 Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right,  
    who speaks the truth from his heart.
- 3 There is no guile upon his tongue;  
    he does no evil to his friend;  
    he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.
- 4 In his sight the wicked is rejected,  
    but he honors those who fear the LORD.
- 5 He has sworn to do no wrong  
    and does not take back his word.
- 6 He does not give his money in hope of gain,  
    nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
- 7 Whoever does these things  
    shall never be overthrown.

*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 them-

selves 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 Jesus, 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.”



## SERMON

Here's a pretty puzzle that the Revised Common Lectionary has put before us this week. Moses gives the Law to the people.

Moses said: So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

Well, that seems pretty clear, but then Mark tells us that Jesus, who we have been taught was the perfect law-keeper, didn't keep the law, at least according to His critics!

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his dis-

ciples 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?”

To understand what is going on here, we need to understand something about “the Law”. My impression is that when 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians speak of the Law, what we mentally reference is “The Ten Commandments”.

1. I’m God and I make the rules. Don’t forget it.
2. Don’t make idols.
3. Don’t use my Name for anything other than addressing me.
4. Remember the day of rest I gave you each week.

5. Deal respectfully with your parents. They taught you how to use a toilet.
6. Don't kill each other.
7. Don't mess around with somebody else's wife or husband.
8. Don't take stuff that belongs to somebody else.
9. Don't lie to get somebody else in trouble.
10. Don't wind yourself up by wishing you had stuff somebody else has, for no good will come of that.

That's a pretty good list of stuff to do and not to do, but that's not "the Law". When I'm told something about the Ten Commandments, I usually ask, "What about the other 603?" There are actually 613 Commandments in the Law, not to mention a lot of commentary. It is a BIG subject, so big, indeed, that studying it is the work of a lifetime. The Law covers every aspect of living, from rising up to lying down, and from birth to death. The Law is so comprehensive that scrupulously following it sets God's people apart from the other

peoples around them, just as Moses told them it would.

... everyone that hears about your laws will say, “That great nation certainly is wise!” And what makes us greater than other nations? We have a God who is close to us and answers our prayers.<sup>1</sup>

Moses tells the people that to be one of God’s chosen people, one follows God’s laws, so what are we to make of it when Jesus chooses NOT to do so, and permits his disciples to do likewise? To the Jews of the time it must have looked like someone wandering into a Church of Christ A Capella and playing “Nearer My God To Thee” on a French harp!

Contemporary thinking (assuming we take the time to think about it at all) runs something like, “Jesus fulfilled the law (whatever that means) to free us from it, (except the Ten Commandments because we like them)

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 4:6-8, Contemporary English Version (CEV), Copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society

so we can eat bacon now.” I would humbly suggest that there’s more than that going on here because Jesus gets pretty testy in response to the criticism.

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.”

“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” That’s it in a nutshell, isn’t it? Jesus is saying that God will not settle for lip service. Following even a very good list of do’s and don’ts for the sake of the list is meaningless. Following a teaching that reveals to us what we could become and internalizing it is true worship. Let’s see if we can unravel this pretty puzzle.

First, we have to acknowledge that Mark's understanding of Jewish practice seems to have been pretty spotty. Mark was a Gentile, and he was writing to Gentiles, so the whole issue of Jewish purity laws was foreign to both him and to his first readers. Nonetheless, he was aware that Jews wash their hands before eating.

There are, in fact, several instances in which an observant Jew is to wash his hands. Perhaps the most important is the requirement that he do so before eating bread. In Hebrew, it is called *netilat yadayim*, meaning "the lifting up of the hands." To eat without the washing (and the blessing that goes with it) is to eat with "defiled hands". We're not talking about a hygienic scrubbing here. The water must reach the middle knuckle of one's hands. It frankly has nothing to do with cleanliness, or very little. It has to do with ritual purity imposed upon the priests of Aaron before they could touch

the bread offering<sup>2</sup>. To assure that the priests never forgot to run water over their hands before touching the bread offering, the obligation was placed on all Jews. It is so serious a requirement that those who willfully neglect its practice are liable to excommunication, so the protest raised by the Scribes is a serious one.

But, why is Jesus' response so forceful? Is it not because His critics are teaching how to do, while Jesus is teaching how to BE? Jesus is teaching that the requirements of the Law are signposts to a committed relationship with God, not an end to themselves.

“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,

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2 Exodus 30:17-21 The Lord spoke to Moses: You shall make a bronze basin with a bronze stand for washing. You shall put it between the tent of meeting and the altar, and you shall put water in it; with the water Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet. When they go into the tent of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister, to make an offering by fire to the Lord, they shall wash with water, so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die: it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations.

theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Our meetings with people in our lives require an extensive list of agreed behaviors, when to extend a hand, when not to, what to say, how and when to make eye contact with a stranger. On the other hand, those of us in a committed relationship need only one rule: Do whatever is pleasing to the other. Living in a committed relationship is much easier. That’s why it is so pleasant. Living with strangers and acquaintances is more difficult. That’s why there are so many rules.

The 613 Commandments are not there to demonstrate that God’s people are eccentric. They are there to proclaim that God’s people know that the human heart must be guarded at every instance lest the evil intentions, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice,



wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly, that lurk within our hearts overpower us. The Letter of James tells us:

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.

To recognize our capacity for sin, and to fence ourselves away from it, is the beginning of wisdom. To make an idol of the Law, offering to God's creation a false witness or mere lip service while all the time cultivating evil in the darkness of our hearts, is sin.

AMEN



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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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