

# Called to be Active Disciples

James 1:17-27

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## 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 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. 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 him, 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."*



Opening Prayer:

MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.

- Thomas Merton, "Thoughts in Solitude"

The Maine Conference of the United Church of Christ sponsored a bumper sticker some 25 years ago. It said. **"To love is to care. To care is to do."** I like the short, clear wording of that message. It has an algebraic cadence. If A is equal to B and B equal to C then A is equal to C. Love is hard to define but it is certainly found in caring for others. And real caring for others naturally finds itself doing things for others that express that care.

Our Scripture lessons today offer us guidance around this subject, the subject of discipleship, of how we are to live out what we believe, how we act day by day in accordance with who we understand ourselves to be.

The letter of James is written to the believers. It is a letter of encouragement reminding them who they are and how they are to live out their calling. These are helpful words to us in our time as well. God is the giver of all good gifts. We are blessed each day and nourished by these blessings. We are reminded of the danger of speaking too quickly, of not listening, of taking things personally and getting angry and acting out in anger. We are counseled to use the gift of God, the Good News of Jesus, and to make something from what has been given us. Like the Parable of the Talents, we are encouraged to invest the implanted Word of God, not to bury it in the ground.

The author of the letter uses a mirror analogy to help the audience see the message: *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.*

In contrast, doers of the word retain the image they saw, they keep the word in focus as they go about their daily lives. One way people in today's world keep the word focused is to have a talisman close to their body or their places of residence. Jewish households have a mezuzah, a scroll of parchment within a rectangular box attached to the jamb of the front door. On the parchment is a portion of Torah, God's word, reminding the believer of God's oneness. Many Christians wear something on their body, like a cross around their neck or a wristband with the letters, WWJD, short for "What would Jesus do?" The point of James' letter is to remember who we are and whose we are and to see that this reality impacts on our daily lives and actions.

The Gospel lesson has a similar message. In this case, however, we are reminded how certain actions, even when thought of as faithful, dutiful, and religious, may be just the opposite and may be barriers to authentic discipleship. The good Jew, the faithful, pious Jew correctly identifies Jesus' disciples as not keeping the rules of their faith. They question Jesus and he instructs them to look for the Spirit of the Torah, the Spirit of the Word, and not be distracted by the letter of the law. He quotes the prophet Isaiah with words about empty worship:

*This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
in vain do they worship me.*

We can all relate to this message. It is called hypocrisy. Saying one thing but meaning the opposite. Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke to this by saying:

*Go put your creed into your deed.  
What you do speaks so loud that I cannot hear what you say.*

The reminder of Jesus was for the religious leader and for us: we are judged by what we do, not by what we say.

We joke about this reality when we say to our children: Do as I say, not as I do.

This dilemma, the human challenge to have congruence between our intentions, our belief stance, and our actions, our behavior, is real. The apostle Paul knew this when he wrote to the church in Rome. He wrote: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:15)*

The Good News is that God knows our condition. God knows that we intend good for ourselves and our neighbor. God knows we fail to do the good we intend. And God loves us in our failure as well as in our obedience. That is called grace. But God's love for us in our failure, our greed, our hypocrisy, our callousness, our inhumanity to our neighbor, does not relieve us from the call to be active disciples of Jesus. The call to discipleship, alert, watchful, active discipleship is constant and it is accompanied by the Spirit of God to help us do what we are not able to do on our own.

In our UCC Statement of Faith there is a beautiful paragraph that links our belief and our actions. It goes like this:

*God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be servants in the service of the whole human family,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory.*

This statement reminds us, as we leave the mirror and try to stay focused on our call, of the reality that there is both cost and joy in being a disciple of Jesus. The cost is often around the changes we are called to make in our way of thinking, our way of acting, to turn away from living for ourselves alone and more toward living for others, as Jesus did. The joy of discipleship is community, the blessed community God intends for all creation, the oneness of life, the connectedness of blessing and worth.

My sorrow is your sorrow. Your sorrow is my sorrow. My joy is your joy. Your joy is my joy.

There are any number of ways we encourage active discipleship in ourselves and in one another. Some ways are more helpful than others. Some are not helpful at all. Guilt and shame are not to be recommended. They don't work and, furthermore, God does not want us to use them.

One way of encouragement is to remind ourselves that discipleship is an ongoing process and journey, not a once and completed sort of experience. Being Christian is a lifetime enterprise not an accomplishment to be recorded in a scrapbook. In that light I find it helpful to sing a prayer like this one:

“Day by day  
Day by day  
Oh dear Lord, three things I pray  
To see thee more clearly  
love thee more dearly  
follow thee more nearly,  
Day by day”

Thanks be to God. Amen.