

By Father Charles Bowes

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8  
James 1:1-17-18, 21b-22, 27  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

## *God loves even us Pharisees*

The fornicators among us are surely going to be disturbed by Jesus' words in Mark chapter 7. So also the greedy-guts. The same might be said of the liars, adulterers, thieves, killers, sensualists, the envious, the arrogant and the difficult.

Perhaps the best approach is to scrap the whole gospel and talk about love or parish development. It is not uncommon, after all, for us to gloss over those parts of the gospel that offend us. But usually we have to listen to the stuff and squirm.

It is a funny thing to sit in the pew on Sundays when a whole list of sins and sinners is listed from the gospels or the various epistles. Our shoulders shrink a bit in hope that we are not mentioned, or at least that the blows fall not too hard. Possibly we feel relieved that smoking and drinking are not mentioned. Some of us may sigh. It is those "others" that Jesus is talking about.

Well maybe we dwell – savoring it – on those "others." That gal who has loads of money. I hope she heard the word "greed." Or the guy who has seen three marriages. He'd better be listening. Or those fakes who think they're so good; they'll get their fill of this gospel.

And I hope those people who eat and drink too much know what the word "sensuality" means. They could learn a thing or two if they would just open up their ears. As for those who envy my own virtue and success, thank God they are condemned as well.

The old Pharisees were experts in the law. Matters of right and wrong. Weighty concerns of judgment. They knew where people stood. But Jesus seemed to have more difficulty with the Pharisees than with any other group. They did not mind hearing about sin, as long as it didn't apply to them. They were righteous, but self-righteously so. They honored their self-images and projections, their own traditions. Jesus quoted Isaiah to penetrate their defenses: "You teach as dogma mere human precepts."

For me, this stings a bit. I do a lot of teaching about what the Church says. I cherish what has been handed down as tried and true. But if I cherish tradition, must I not be vigilant that my heart is in the right place? Does Christ speak to me when He says: "You disregard God's commandment and cling to what is human tradition"? Does he address his Church? Its scribes? Its leaders? "This people pays me lip service but their heart is far from me. Empty is the reverence they give me because they teach as dogmas mere human precepts."

As important as it is to “rejoice in the Lord,” it is equally important not to cause grief or sorrow to each other. It is genuine religion when we come to church to lay down our burdens – especially our guilt – to know that we are forgiven, that we are loved, that we belong. Consolation and peace are at the heart of the gospel. But it is also genuine religion to bear one another’s burdens; indeed, St. Paul says that is how we fulfill the law of Christ. The love of neighbor, the love that shows itself in deeds, is very much at the heart of the gospel.

I think a single consolation is this: if our hearts are stung by Jesus’ challenge to the Pharisees, our hearts are almost healed. A gifted and forceful woman once told me of a horrifying revelation. She realized in prayer that she was the Pharisee, she who judged others, she who did not trust God.

What a lovely moment. If you think you are a Pharisee, you most surely are not. If you think you’re not, watch out.

Take a moment now...get in touch with a recent judgment passed upon another...Let us pray: “O good and gracious God, healer of souls, soften our judging hearts and set us free. We ask this through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.”

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