

[Deut. 4:1-2, 6-8; Ps. 15; James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23]

Jesus' disciples eat with defiled hands. This is a problem not just for those of us still living in [COVID-time](#). The disciples come into the marketplace, sharing food with anyone who is there. They don't wash their hands, separating themselves from the common folks. But the [Pharisees and the scribes](#) will have none of that. They want the disciples to be pure, apart from everyone else. They are worried more about purity than inviting the common folks into the Kingdom. They separate themselves from others, becoming exclusive. They are "in" and everyone else is "out."

This, according to Jesus, is disregarding God's commandment. What is that commandment?

Let us remember that the people of Israel are to keep the whole Law. They are to add nothing to [the Law](#), as the Pharisees and scribes seem to have done. The Ten Commandments become 613 Commandments. But more importantly, they are to keep the whole Law. But Jesus says that the Law is not just about regulations or rules governing behavior. To keep the Law is to be a witness to all the nations of God's saving mercy to Israel.

Keeping the Law would therefore require an openness to all those in the marketplace, inviting them into the Kingdom. [Setting oneself apart from the common folks](#) is therefore against the Law. There is no "us" and "them."

Jesus teaches something new about defilement. It's not about what we eat. What we drink. Whether we wash our hands or not, although you should to be hygienic. It's about purity of heart. A heart entirely open to the will of God, to announcing the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth.

Isn't this what St. James is talking about in the second reading for this Sunday? Yes, the word of God dwells in us, the baptized sons and daughters of the living God. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for people in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Purity of heart is therefore not just an interior or individual affair. Purity of heart is openness to the brother and sister in need.

The one who has no one to care for him. The one who has no one who loves her. This is how we keep ourselves unstained before God.

This is a dose of bitter wisdom that we need to hear right now.

The United States right now -- on both the left and the right -- seems to be driven by a terrifying view of individual liberty.

Catholics have proclaimed, way too frequently, "my body, my rights."

"My body, no reason to get a vaccine."

"My body, who cares about the neighbor who is sick? My family is fine."

"My body, if there's some conservative fool who isn't vaccinated, that's their problem and not mine. Let it be a Charles Darwin test: survival of the fittest.

Here comes James and Jesus, preaching to us.

This is not purity of heart. This is not the Gospel.

Your body is not yours alone. It's not about your individual practices of purity, your personal liberty against the common good.

Salvation through Jesus is different.

It's the body given over for the life of the world. For the neighbor.

It's a bodily imitation of Christ who never met a human being with whom He did not enter a relationship: the [widow](#), the orphan, the sick, the poor, the stranger, the immigrant, the [Samaritan](#). If we are to follow Jesus, let us give up our purity tests. And enter a loving relationship with the common folks.

Love alone, dear friends, is what makes us pure.

St. James challenges you and me in our Second Reading to humbly welcome the Word of God and to "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only." Just to proclaim or listen to God's Word without acting on it is empty indeed.

We become what the Greeks call "hypocrites" – actors who portray one thing on the outside but are someone completely different on the inside.

What would happen if we focused on purifying our hearts? We'd have to give up judgmentalism, gossip, envy, and bias. We'd have to discipline our thoughts and stop entertaining delicious resentments and nursing old injuries.

Purity of heart demands vigilance, daily and hourly practice, and a lot of space for self-forgiveness. The sooner we begin, the sooner we'll get there. AMEN!