### “What Comes Out” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 1, 2024

**James 1:17–21**

17Every 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. . .

19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. . . 21Rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

**Mark 7:2–8, 14–15, 21–22**

2 The Pharisees noticed that some of his disciples were eating without washing their hands. 3(For the Pharisees . . . 4do not eat anything unless they wash it; and they observe the washing of cups, pots, and kettles.) 5The Pharisees asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6He said, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ 8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

14 Then he called the crowd and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: 15there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. . . 21evil intentions, theft, murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit.”

How do you get closer to God? That’s part of what we’ll look at in today’s Scriptures and sermon. What if you were already closer to God than you realized, and the problem is simply your level of *realization* or awareness? Then the solution would be learning to trust in God’s closeness, finding a way to believe in it.

Well, let’s look at the passages. What is Jesus saying about the Pharisaic traditions? He is pointing out that they are not biblical. The Pharisees observed all the biblical commands, but added hundreds of more rules and procedures. It became a burdensome and ritualistic lifestyle. Jesus does not rebuke them for following the Bible, but for “teaching human precepts as doctrines,” and actually abandoning the real commandments for their human traditions.

Probably the commandment they are about to break is the one against murder. Therefore he concludes that they honor God with their lips but their hearts are far away (Mark 7:6; quoting Isaiah 29:13). Isaiah adds a nice little touch that is not in Mark. Isaiah wrote “their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote” (29:13). Jesus quotes the “human commandment” part of it, but leaves out the mention of rote-learning. Of course, rote-learning sometimes is only memory-deep, and not heartfelt.

Isaiah saw this happening. Isaiah also saw the supposedly wise people as trying to hide their evil-doing, whose “deeds are in the dark, and who say, ‘Who sees us? Who knows us?’” (29:15). This finds a fulfillment in Jesus’ time, too. The Sadducees and some of the Pharisees were plotting Jesus’ destruction, acting as though no one could see their sneaky plots. But “truth will out.” The Truth finds a way; but truth also needs a receiver. We need to be *receptive* and to *recognize* truth.

It could have helped if the Pharisees could have listened to the advice that James would give a few years later: “rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness” (James 1:21). There is no evil in God, James says, “no variation or shadow” (1:17), and he certainly would not condone their murderous plotting.

The passage in Mark has Jesus focusing in on good and evil, rather than on ritual purity. Pharisaic concerns were chiefly with ritual purity, with cleaning the outside of the cup (Matt 23:26), as Jesus says elsewhere. But Jesus says it is *moral* impurity that corrupts a person, and that doesn’t come from the outside but comes out from the heart. So Jesus changes the discussion about impurity from *ritual* impurity to *moral* impurity, that is, evildoing: theft, murder, adultery, dishonesty, and envy. It is what is *inside* a person that matters. If one is not *inwardly* honest and good, one’s worship of God is only lip-service. One’s service is superficial. Jesus says “first clean the inside” (Matt 23:26). Furthermore, first take the log out of your own eye before taking the mote out of another’s (Matt 7:5).

I want to return to the passage in James that says every gift “com[es] down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). There is no evil in God, but there is evil in the world, isn’t there? So we come to the problem of theodicy: the question of why does God allow evil? Of course, the simplest answer is that he has to allow evil so that we may have free will, so that any loyalty that we show is voluntary, coming from our own heart.

In decision making, we should trust that God can help us. Jeremiah heard God saying, “Call to me and I will answer you” (Jer 33:3). Paul said to bring everything to God in prayer with thanksgiving (Phil 4:6). We can also consult our friends, and balance out their advice. Proverbs says “in an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Prov 11:14). Finally, let your reflection be guided by values. Returning to Paul, we read “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just . . . if there is any excellence . . . think about these things” (Phil 4:8). And Jesus gives us the greatest prayer-guide when he says “your will be done” (Matt 6:10).

Clearly, we are meant to choose goodness and tenderness of heart, and reject sordidness and wickedness. To help us, there is a word implanted within us that “has the power to save your souls,” James says (1:21). This right choosing is the business of living. It is what puts us into harmony with God. Rituals are of little to no help, and they might just end up being a way of honoring God only with our lips and our gestures, and not with our hearts and our loyalties. Rituals can be effective if they contain meaning and value, bringing us into closer harmony to God.

Author Jonathan Foster says “The mechanism to ‘get to’ God isn’t sacrifice . . . or death; [it] is grace. Grace reveals we don’t have to do anything to ‘get to’ God for God is already present. . . ‘But what about separation?’ Separation can be seen as something we experience over against something that is reality. . . It’s what we *think* is happening, especially when we feel shame” (substack.com/@jonathanunderscorefoster/note/c-66910157?utm\_source=feed-email-digest). Also when we feel guilt about being apparently too busy.

Let us affirm and choose every good gift that comes down from the Father of lights, in whom there is no shadow of turning. God intends good for us, but we need to be diligent and wise in order to bring it about. There are many forces that do harm to our lives: greed, loneliness, anxiety, boredom, addiction, aimlessness, resentment, revenge, bigotry, and lust for power. Any one of these can wreck a life. Our protection is through focused spiritual purpose, loving relationships, and the ability to learn from experience. So: spirit, love, and wisdom. Go and get more spirit, more love, and more wisdom into your lives.

I’ll tell you the story of the conversion of Jack Lewis. Jack was a professor of medieval literature. He was an amiable agnostic; he had a successful career, was liked by his peers and his students, and didn’t need a change in his life. But a change came. He had been reading and appreciating some Christian authors like G. K. Chesterton and George MacDonald, but didn’t yet share their faith. Jack was alone in his study one night, working, and “feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England” (Surprised By Joy, 266). This is the man we know as C. S. Lewis, who wrote brilliant theology books including *Mere Christianity* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

His friends Hugo Dyson and J. R. R. Tolkien were an influence that pushed Lewis in the direction of faith, especially after a conversation the three of them had about the Truth hidden within legends ([www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/conversion-story-of-c-s-lewis-9821](http://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/conversion-story-of-c-s-lewis-9821)). He found a truth higher than himself and his intellect; he was “taken out of my self” to love God and others ([www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/the-most-reluctant-convert/](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/the-most-reluctant-convert/)). In *Mere Christianity* he wrote “The only things we can keep are the things we freely give to God. What we try to keep for ourselves is just what we are sure to lose.” Let us also be grateful for the gifts that come down from the Father of lights to transform our lives. Let us be open to God’s transforming love.