### “Be Doers,” by S. Finlan, September 2, 2018

**James 1:17–18, 22, 27**

17 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. 18In 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. . . . 22 Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. . . .

27 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 7:4–8, 15, 21–23**

4 There are many traditions that the Pharisees observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles. 5So 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?” 6He 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; 7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ 8You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition. . . .”

15“There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile. . . . 21theft, murder, 22adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. 23All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

We will be looking at the Epistle of James for three Sundays. Church tradition understands *this* James to be James the Lord’s brother (Jesus’ brother), not either one of the two apostles who were named James. James the Lord’s brother was extremely important, having been the head of the Jerusalem church and leader of a certain kind of Christianity with strong connections to Jewish traditions and law.

The content of the letter looks like it really could have been written by a conservative Jew with a knowledge and love of the Bible and a grasp of Jesus’ moral teaching. James is citing a common phrase from the prophets when he says “care for orphans and widows in their distress” (James 1:27). The phrases “first fruits” and “pure and undefiled” used in this passage (1:18, 27) are language from the sacrificial and purity practices of Judaism, here being used metaphorically.

There are some striking phrases and concepts in this passage. He speaks of gifts coming down from the “Father of lights,” an unusual phrase, but even more interesting is when he says, regarding the Father: “with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). This advanced idea of an all-good and unchanging God is one that Jesus could have uttered, and it is notably different from the Old Testament idea that God is the source of *both* good and evil, and that he is moody and changes his mind. But James says God is *not* the source of any “*shadow*,” and that there is *no* “variation” or “change” in him.

This newer understanding, this advanced religious thinking probably reflects James’ memory of what Jesus taught about the *all-goodness* of God, a *significant* departure from previous teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says God would not give a stone or a snake to a child who asked for bread or a fish (Matt 7:9–10). Rather, “your Father in heaven [will] give *good* things” (7:11). James evidently picked up on that message.

As for the *unchangeability* of God, we don’t have any record of Jesus speaking on that, but I think he would have affirmed what the prophet Malachi said: “For I the Lord do not change” (Mal 3:6). To clarify: we are constantly growing in our *understanding* of God, but *God* is unchanging.

Another fascinating idea in this passage is that “he gave us birth by the word of truth” (1:18). I don’t know if that means the word spoken by Jesus, or the word spoken by God in the beginning, but it’s fascinating, either way. Imagine, to be *born from truth*!

Now, James makes his central point when he says “be *doers* of the word, and not merely hearers” (1:22). Again, he sounds a lot like his brother, Jesus, when he emphasizes doing good, and showing compassion for widows and orphans. This is so much more important than the mechanical rituals emphasized by the Pharisees, which Jesus mocks in today’s gospel passage. Jesus even calls their precious traditions mere “human precepts” which they hold *instead of* “the commandment of God” (Mark 7:7–8).

Make no mistake: in the quest to become closer to God, a ritual is never *required*, although rituals *can* be useful if they help you to reflect spiritually.

Jesus’ central point here is that what *really* defiles is not what you *eat*, or what is *ritually* impure,but what you *do*. That comes “from *within*” (1:15, 23).

There is a very strong moral emphasis in both of these passages. You do *not* hear about theological doctrines, and you don’t even hear the word “faith,” which will become so important in the writings of Paul. Here there is a focus upon honesty and goodness, including good motives. And Jesus holds this in *contrast* to a fastidious and nit-picky attention to ritual purification. It is not minutiae but *motives* that matter. Jesus would say *purify your motives*, since these lead to good *acts*. When we act in accordance with God’s will, we bring a little bit of heaven to earth, we bring spirit into matter, and make the Divine present—*here*.

So, be a *doer* of the word. Bring joy into the daily life. You can let your imagination *work* on the word. You can be creative. Let’s take that mysterious but beautiful saying “he gave us birth by the word of truth” (James 1:18). *Savor* the saying for a moment. What does it mean *to you*?

Take it to heart. Let your mind roll it around and taste it, like a good morsel. Maybe it means that God intended good for us right from the start. Perhaps it means there is a love of truth planted deep within us, since we are *all* the children of God. Or could the word of truth be Jesus himself, or his teachings, which gave us new life? Maybe he is the finest “light” that has come down from the Father of Lights?

Is the “word of truth” Christian teaching, or is it a spiritual reality even deeper than any teaching, but an actual spiritual power that is within *all* of us, a power that *enables* us to do good, to be courageous, to serve orphans and widows, or anybody else? Maybe this is a kind of truth that cannot be known solely with the mind, but has to be known through *experience*, through what you *do* in life. Real purity consists in your motives, and your motives are shown in your actions.

“He gave us birth by the word of truth.” And if you cherish truth inwardly, truth will manifest in your actions. You will not brag about your personal qualities, for truth will be evident in your actions. You need not engage in ritual washings to become pure, or memorizations of texts prove your understanding. If goodness has come *into* your heart, goodness will come *out* of your heart. If you are a lover of truth, you will be a doer of truth. It has become second nature.

A lover of truth can still have some doubts. In fact, doubt is probably evidence that you’re still seriously *pursuing* the truth, and won’t rest content until you find it. A lover of truth doesn’t have to *know* all the truth, but only has to *love* truth—for its *quality*, its *flavor*, its *value*. Your instinctive love of truth, if you have it, is the pearl of great price. Never let go of that!

It is a gift, and “every perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights.” Cherish the gift you have been given. And contemplate what this means *to you*: “He gave us birth by the word of truth.”

Go out today, knowing your Father of Lights has given you a gift and trusts you to use your heavenly gift here on earth.

Dear Father, we know you are the One source of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. We thank you for the gifts you have given us. We ask that you guide us as we go forward, seeking to know your goodness and to bring spiritual beauty into our lives here on earth. Amen.