

## Sins of Omission

Epistle: James 1:17-27

Gospel: Mark 7:1-8; 14-15; 21-23

### Proper 17

A Sunday school teacher was teaching her class about different types of sin. She began with sins of commission. “These are sins we have committed - things we have done that break God’s law. Now”, she said, “who can tell me what sins of omission are”? There was a long silence, until one girl said, “Sins of omission – are those the sins we should have committed, but didn’t”?

Today’s gospel tells us about those sins that Jesus and his disciples are supposed to have committed, but didn’t. Jesus has already been criticised by the religious authorities for healing on the Sabbath and associating with the unclean. Now the religious authorities question his disciples’ failure to follow the appropriate rituals of hand washing before eating. Jesus’ response is blunt: he calls his critics hypocrites and points out that their rules and practices are of secondary importance. It’s not the external things that defile a person, he says, but the internal things. It’s that which comes out of us, our thoughts, our words and our actions that define our relationship with God. But the Pharisees and Scribes are

so obsessed with the externals of religion that they have forgotten about the internal life of faith.

I can still remember those heated arguments that I had with my parents in my teenage years about my clothes, my footwear – or lack of footwear and so on. How many of you remember those arguments? The fact that most of my friends looked the same didn't placate my parents at all. In hindsight I think they might agree that while I and my friends often looked less than respectable on the outside, we weren't all bad on the inside. But they were caught up in the assumption that if you looked tidy and clean cut, you must believe in clean living, and if you looked a little wild, you must be a little wild.

So today Jesus faces the problem of religious institutions which regard the external code of behaviour as more important than our internal relationship with God. This was and still is an age old issue. The Hebrew prophet Amos was speaking for God when he wrote, "I hate, I despise your festivals, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings ... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-24). James reiterated this in his Epistle, which we heard earlier: "Religion that is pure

and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress” (1:27). For practising Jews, and for Christians today, caring for the poor, the distressed and the heartbroken takes priority, and is not optional. It lies at the heart of the God’s Law.

God does not want our rituals or our rules if they take the place of living a life of love and service and faithfulness. That is something we should especially remember in a place like this, where the trappings of religion can easily outstrip our faithfulness to the God which we try to serve and worship.

Tony Campollo, a pastor and social activist now retired, used to travel and preach in churches and colleges throughout the United States. He would often challenge his listeners saying, “The United Nations reports that over ten thousand people starve to death every day, and most of you don’t give a ---”, fill in the blank. There was always a gasp of horror from his listeners, and then he would go on and say, “However, what is even more tragic is that most of you are more concerned about my language than you are about the fact that ten thousand people are going to die of hunger today”.

Sadly, almost every time after he preached at one of these places, he would receive a letter or two from

someone protesting his foul language, but never mentioning world hunger. The problem of institutionalised religion is that it becomes very easy to make too much of the rules of that institution and too little of the living God that that institution is supposed to represent.

Certainly, there are many church members, who work very hard to address the needs of the most vulnerable. But when you look at the church as a whole, it sometimes seems that there is far too much concern with matters of secondary importance. For years the world has watched our leaders tying themselves in knots over human sexuality, the inerrancy of Scripture, and who should or should not be ordained, while the hands of the poor – widows and orphans – have remained empty. Jesus is not concerned with a person's cleverness, or status, or ritual cleanliness. And the poor of the world are too busy wondering where their next meal is coming from to be bothered about church hierarchy or what St Paul REALLY meant when he said this or that.

The ethics of Jesus include very few dos and don'ts, and almost no ritual demands. For the most part, those demands have been added by humans. The Torah, particularly Leviticus, is full of commands and

advice on weights and measures, fabrics and clothing, diet and religious holidays. Many Orthodox Jews still follow those rules scrupulously, demonstrating that it is possible to do so. On the other hand, the ethics of Jesus are virtually impossible to follow: Love your neighbour? Yes, okay. Love your enemy? Oh dear, that's pushing it. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor? Hold on – that means turning our whole lives upside down. But that's what Jesus asks. He wants our hands, our minds, and our hearts to do his work of compassion in the world.

Whatever kind of faith we proclaim, whatever kind of relationship we seek with God is up to ourselves. Are we simply going to play by the rules, or are we going to do his work to bring hope, peace, comfort and reconciliation to those most in need?

I would like to end with a prayer for the world and for ourselves:

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships, so that his truth will live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so leading us to work for justice, equality, and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejections, starvation, and war, leading us to reach out our hands to comfort them and change their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with the foolishness to think that we can make a difference in the world, leading us to do the things which others tell us cannot be done (from Canon Howard Anderson, 2006).

**Amen**

Martha Taft Golden  
t. Mary's, Holmbury

and  
1<sup>st</sup> S