

Study Guide for September 2, 2018

Readings: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-23

Theme: Looking inward

I find it refreshing when the lectionary offers so many wonderful readings, each one pulling a similar thread. I am hoping that you will see in this week's readings a running theme about worshipping God with our words and deeds. Tempting as it is to try to use all these passages in one message, I am going to narrow the focus down to just the New Testament passages from James' amazing letter and Mark's powerful gospel. It will be my intentions to show you how good (and bad) religion begins within us.

As you read these passages I would invite you to look, with an open heart and mind, at how you perceive the word "religion" and how it has affected your life. I would also suggest you think of this word not only as an organized event or product, but also as a form of "worship." That is to say, good religion or good worship begins with a good heart. As that old saying goes, "It's what's on the inside that matters the most." Thus, as James writes, we must be doers of the word and not merely followers. That is to say, take the words that God has placed on our hearts and put it to good use; producing righteousness and good worship to our Lord.

READ: Song of Solomon 2:8-13 (If able read the entire book)

What an invitation! There are few more evocative, alluring images of joyful satiation than this excerpt from the Song of Solomon. In fact, this brief book is filled with such sweet, colorful and tantalizing images, it's worth a read from beginning to end. Interestingly, you'll find that there is nothing sentimental or superficially romantic about this poem. Alongside does prancing in gardens and moonlit rendezvous, you'll find scenes of confusion, loss and violence: these lovers encounter each other in a city prowling with armed guards and cultural, if not racial, prejudice. Enjoy this song of songs for its unbridled joy, and grant also that it speaks to a vision of the fulfillment of time wherein love enters into its most profound consummation.

Q: Where is the joy and love between you and God, and how might you share it with others?

Q: What does love poetry have to do with a life of faith, and how might your love for God be translated into worship outside the traditional church setting?

Prayer: Lord God, as my heart sings your praises may your love for me always be upon my lips this day and everyday, Amen.

READ: James 1:17-27; Luke 11:27-28; John 13:16-20; Isaiah 56:1-8

We have no idea who James is. Many have speculated that it is the brother of Jesus, while others believe it is one of the two disciples who were named James. What we do know is this person seems to have a close relationship or working knowledge of Jesus, for his letter offers practical advice on living a righteous life. You might have noticed how this passage offers instruction on how to offer God praise and how to be “the kind of first fruits of his creation” too – doing and not merely hearing. “Pure” religion has a purpose beyond rites and rituals. Like faith, worship requires action – speaking from a heart of love, and caring for orphans and widows. This is an ongoing process, a daily habit! We must always be responsible for doing the will of God for God’s people by taking serious our responsibilities and behaviors; be it our emotional lives as well as religious faith!

Q: If the church is the people of God, then where is the church Monday - Saturday?

Q: In reading the gospel texts, how might you say that being a doer of the word (and not just a hearer of the word) brings about blessings. And how does that allow you to rejoice and worship God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

Prayer: Blessed Holy Spirit, I pray for your presence and guidance this day as I study the Word and seek ways to apply it in my life. Amen.

READ: Mark 7:1-23; Exodus 30:17-21; Isaiah 29:13

Jesus’ message is simple and clear, yet hard to hear and apply to daily life. What makes it easier is to view the Pharisees as the bad guys; hypocrites whom Jesus must condemn. But in reality, they are merely doing what the law required of them (the law that required a priest to wash his hand before eating but not laypeople). Jesus recognized that the leaders believed the laws the priest were required to follow applied to all Israelites. It was their way or the highway! Their hearts had become hardened with pride and arrogance. Jesus uses their prophets to remind them, “it’s not what goes into a mouth that defiles but what comes out; because it comes from the heart.” Right worship begins inward on our hearts where God lives.

Q: Have you ever been the one who defiles? Or at least been accused of it?

Q: How much ought we to trust tradition in our religion?

Q: When does tradition constrain or enable our personal and collective spiritual growth? When does it become less about God and more about ourselves?

Prayer: Lord Christ, cleanse my heart so that I may reflect your love and will, and not my own. Amen.

Slow Read: Psalm 45. As you meditate on these words, ask the Holy Spirit to offer you new ways to deepen your worship experience with God.