

22nd Sunday per Annum - B
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8;
James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27;
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Little Flower - 8/30/15

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's second reading, St. James reminds us that "*all good giving and every perfect gift comes from above...*" In other words, God is the giver of all gifts, human and divine. Today's readings focus on our response to God's gifts.

As we all know, in the Old Testament, on Mount Sinai, God offered the Israelites a covenant. God promised to make them his chosen people and to give them a homeland if they would keep the Ten Commandments. In today's reading from Deuteronomy, Moses presents God's Law to the Israelites, telling them to neither add to it nor subtract from it. Second, he enjoins them to observe the Law carefully. If they keep the Law, they will live and take possession of the Promised Land. Also, their observance of the Law will be a sign to the nations of their wisdom and intelligence.

In the Old Testament, fidelity to the Covenant was what was most important for the Israelites. Fidelity to the Covenant consisted in obeying God, i.e., keeping the commandments of God. Holiness in the Old Testament was found in right relationships with God, others, the world, and themselves. Keeping the Ten Commandments contributed to right relationships and, therefore, to holiness of life.

If some people want to subtract from God's laws, i.e., ignore them, religions and some religious people tend to want to add laws and rules. In today's Gospel, Jesus said, "*Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.' You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition.*"

Likewise, what Moses said, St. James said more powerfully: "*Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.*" It is not enough to hear. We have to act. In other words, both St. James and Jesus in today's Gospel look for our response to God to be more than mere observance of the letter of the Law.

St. James defines true religion as caring for widows and orphans and keeping ourselves unstained by the world. Unfortunately, religious people often define themselves by their religious practices. St. James reminds us that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. Practicing our religion means caring for those most in need. The trickier part of the verse is determining what keeping ourselves unstained by the world really means. I would suggest that keeping ourselves unstained by the world is a call to purity of heart, i.e., to live the values of God in our own lives, the values that the Prophet Micah summarized: "*What is good has been explained to you: this is what God asks of you, only this: to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God*" [6:8].

My brothers and sisters, in today's Gospel, Jesus said, "*Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile.*" On one level, what Jesus says is completely true. The verses the Lectionary leaves out of today's Gospel refer to Jewish dietary restrictions. On another level, what Jesus says is not completely true in our culture today. Today all of us, not just young people, are very influenced by the media. What we see and hear in the media can influence our minds and hearts for good or for bad. Therefore, when it comes to what we watch, what we listen to, and what we read, we need to be very discerning so that we make our own and live God's values, not the values of today's media.