

My Brothers and Sisters,

According to the Book of Deuteronomy, before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses counseled the people to observe all the commandments of the Lord without adding to them or subtracting from them so that they could live and take possession of the land the Lord was giving them. In other words, their living and taking possession of the land was contingent upon keeping God's laws. He reminded them that no other nation had statutes and laws as just.

There is much wrong in our world today. The entire world is still in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are divisions in the country over masks and vaccines. Haiti was recently devastated by another earthquake. The people of Afghanistan have lost their freedoms. Several of our military and even more Afghans were killed or wounded in the bombings outside the Kabul airport this past week. In Indianapolis, homicides are at a record level. As of last Sunday, eight children had been shot within the last month here in Indianapolis. Sex trafficking occurs in our city. Alcohol and drug addiction is common. There are many divisions within the Church.

If we think about everything that is wrong today, we are overwhelmed. However, maybe we need to look at the world with eyes of faith. In other words, how many of the problems the world is facing today are the result of not following the commandments of God, are the result of sin. To the extent this is true, what we and the world need is true conversion.

Today's Gospel builds on today's first reading. When the Pharisees and scribes questioned Jesus about his disciples not following the traditions of the elders, Jesus turned the tables on them, accusing them of honoring God with their lips but not their hearts, of teaching as doctrine human precepts, and disregarding God's commandment in favor of human tradition. Obviously, his challenge to them is a challenge to us as well. Do we worship and honor God with our hearts or just with our lips? Do we disregard God's commandments but cling to human traditions?

Jesus then makes an important statement: "*Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person, but the things that come out from within are what defile.*" Jesus then lists the disvalues and bad behavior that come from within and defile a person. I am not sure that Jesus would make exactly the same statement today. From one perspective, it is certainly true that it is what comes from within us, from our hearts, that defile us. However, because of media in general and social media in particular, I am not sure that what enters us cannot also defile us. It certainly seems to me that pornography defiles people, but so does all the hateful rhetoric online. Something to think about!

Today's short passage from the Letter of St. James offers several reflections. In the first verse, St. James reminds us that all gifts, human and divine, come from God. Everything we are and have are God's gifts to us. Some of God's gifts are given to us directly, but others come to us indirectly through others. Whenever God gives a gift, God asks for a return on that gift. Our return is to develop the gift and to share it with others.

St. James calls us to be open to God's word and to allow ourselves to be challenged by it. In other words, we are called to allow our lives to be shaped and directed by God's word. We are to be doers of the word and not just hearers. In other words, if we only hear God's word and do not act on it, it has made no difference.

My brothers and sisters, at the end of the passage, James described pure religion: "*to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*" James's vision corresponds to the vision of Pope Francis. In that time and culture, widows, orphans, and aliens were the marginalized. As important as the Mass and sacraments are, religion is not true unless we care for the marginalized of our time.