

PENTECOST 15

Proper 17 - Year B

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*Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies.
Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.*

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

⁴ “So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. ² You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.

⁶ You must observe them and perform them, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!’ ⁷ For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? ⁸ And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

⁹ “But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.

Commentary from Rachel Joiner

Statutes, ordinances, and commandments; I wonder what thoughts or feelings these words might stir up for you. For some, these words seem restrictive, and for others reassuring. One person takes note of the limitations and another the expectation.

The Israelites have escaped enslavement, wandered in the wilderness, and are now entering the land God promised. Moving from oppression and survival mode to freedom and flourishing is yet another journey for God’s people. This journey is one of physical, emotional, and spiritual transition and transformation. Having statues, ordinances, and commandments supports and guides a new way of being. Being with God, being with one another, and being among and set apart from the surrounding nations. Yes, there are restrictions and limitations, but there are also clear expectations and the reassurance that theirs is a God who has been and continues to be near, faithful, and loving.

Discussion Questions

In times of transition, do you find guidelines and expectations limiting or supportive? Could they be both?

What might be the blessing of neither adding to nor taking away from the instruction God gives us? What might be the challenge?

Psalm 15

- ¹ Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle? *
who may abide upon your holy hill?
- ² Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right, *
who speaks the truth from his heart.
- ³ There is no guile upon his tongue;
he does no evil to his friend; *
he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.
- ⁴ In his sight the wicked is rejected, *
but he honors those who fear the Lord.
- ⁵ He has sworn to do no wrong *
and does not take back his word.
- ⁶ He does not give his money in hope of gain, *
nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
- ⁷ Whoever does these things *
shall never be overthrown.

Commentary from Rachel Joiner

Who can dwell with God? Someone blameless and with no guile, who does no evil to friends, who rejects wickedness, who swears to do no wrong, and who does not give money in hopes of a hefty return. Whew, this is a tall order! Or is it?

It may seem impossible if the focus is only on the beginning of these verses, but when each verse is read completely, it sounds less like an unattainable standard and more like a way of honoring and loving God and our neighbors. How might we be blameless and do what is right? We can speak the truth in love. Inferring that friends and neighbors have a gracious intent keeps us from unhelpful internal dialogues and hurtful speech. Being honest with ourselves and our neighbors fosters healthy relationships. Giving with no expectation and being mindful of how our actions affect innocent and vulnerable populations is a way of seeking, serving, and loving our neighbors.

Discussion Questions

What is a gracious intent? What might a gracious response look and sound like?

How have you felt the presence of God when honoring and loving your neighbors?

James 1:17-27

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. ¹⁸ In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, ²⁰ for human anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

²⁶ If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.

Commentary from Rachel Joiner

Listening and considering what we say and do are ways we can respond that prevent us from reacting in angry, unjust, and unhelpful ways. Reactions tend to be quick and are usually not well-considered. Responding is different than reacting. Responding takes more time, and more time allows for more thinking and consideration. Reacting is easier than responding. Responding just requires more of us.

The author of James desires to promote the understanding and righteousness of being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Being bathed in Christ's gift of love empowers us to rid ourselves of self-serving actions, imparts gentleness, generosity, and care for orphans and widows, oppressed, marginalized, and vulnerable folks. We not only hear, but we listen and respond in love, caring for all of God's beloved children.

Discussion Questions

Do you react or respond when faced with unfamiliar or stressful situations?

How might you move from reacting to responding? Could fostering curiosity, generosity, and/or love be helpful?

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

7 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him,² they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them.³ (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders,⁴ and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash, and there are also many other traditions that they observe: the washing of cups and pots and bronze kettles and beds.)⁵ So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?”⁶ He 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;
⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

⁸“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: sexual immorality, theft, murder,²² adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, folly.²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Commentary from Rachel Joiner

There is a question one can ask that could be received positively (as in seeking to understand) or negatively (as an affront to the custom of a place or people): “Why do you/we do _____ this way?” More scandalous is suggesting a long-standing custom may not serve (or may even be a disservice to) the way it was intended.

The Pharisees and some of the scribes are focused on a long-held tradition, and on the surface, it would seem to be a good thing. Wash what you buy before you eat it, and take care to wash cups, pots, and kettles properly. But Jesus knows their hearts, and the two commandments on which hang all the Law and the Prophets: to love the Lord thy God and to love thy neighbor as thyself. The Pharisees and scribes are more concerned with human tradition than the commandments of God. Neither their tradition nor the intent of their hearts seeks to love God or their neighbor.

Discussion Questions

What traditions do you revere that may be barriers to loving God and/or your neighbor?

How might you examine customs and traditions to ensure they are inclusive?