

Proper 17B: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Virtue Signals

I saw an interview with an actress on the morning TV talk show recently. The interviewer asked the bubbly starlet. "Are you a religious person?" "Well, I am very spiritual, but I gave up on religion when I went to college. I saw all the ways that religion leads to violence, war, and prejudice. I think that religion is one of the worst forces in the world today."

I'm sure you have heard a similar criticism of religion, though perhaps with more depth. The funny thing is, the person making such a critique usually believes that he or she is being radical and daring, on the cutting edge of intellectual exploration. But, the truth is, intellectuals have been bashing God for a long time now. Over 200 years ago, Voltaire announced that he had no need of the "God hypothesis," Nietzsche accused Christianity of fostering a "slave morality," and Karl Marx said that religion was nothing more than "the opium of the masses," a tool that capitalists used to keep the workers down and docile.

Most of these people expected that humanity would soon outgrow its "childish" need for the crutch of religious superstition. In the brave new modern world, nobody would be religious. Of course, they were wrong. Religion is exploding everywhere, except that is in the one area of the world, Europe, which was home to Voltaire, Nietzsche, and Marx!

Even so, a decade ago atheism had a small revival. An Oxford scientist, Richard Dawkins, published *The God Delusion*, a deliberately vicious and at times very mocking attack on religion in general and Christianity in particular. Rather predictably Dawkins represents his atheism as the summit of a long process of human development in which gradually, through the help of science and rational thought, irrational beliefs about the supernatural (religion) are whittled down and overcome. According to his thinking, the human race begins with polytheism, believing in lots of gods. Then, as society becomes more sophisticated, thinking persons climb toward monotheism, belief in only one God. And atheism, the belief that there is no God, just takes this wonderful human progress one step further: having achieved the temple of science and philosophy, the "scaffolding" of religious belief can finally be removed. (As Dawkins playfully remarks, it's as simple as believing in one less god than you did before.)

The trouble is that anyone who studies religion—not from the perspective of ideas, but looking at human behavior "on the ground"—anyone who does that speaks not about *progression*, but the *diversification* of religion. You see, the evidence simply isn't there for us to speak about any kind of natural, linear progression from polytheism to monotheism and then to atheism. Humanity does not show a propensity to believe in less and less, but rather to believe in more and more. Dawkin's fellow Englishman, GK Chesterton, noted this a century before: "When Man ceases to worship God," Chesterton wrote, "he does not worship nothing but worships everything."

I mean, you know people who have their doubts about Jesus but are full of "faith" in macrobiotic diets, in the health benefits of oat bran, in the joys of sex, in the allure of material acquisition. Talk to your neighbors and you'll likely come away thinking that humanity is more "polytheistic" than ever. And, Dawkins, well...he may not believe in the God of Israel and the church, but he sure has faith in his own reason, his education, his English academic culture, and science, and he defends his faith with murderous intensity against anyone who would dare question him.

But modern-day atheists like Dawkins don't just think religion is wrong, they think it is immoral, corrupting. They criticize religious people for their narrowmindedness, their exclusivity and hatred of outsiders, their judgmentalism (of course, Dawkins is patently guilty of those criticism himself). But often the greatest sin (they wouldn't call it that of course, because they don't believe in sin), the greatest criticism is that religious people are hypocrites, especially Christians.

Which is kinda ironic, given that the God we believe in, the Savior we follow, has some pretty sharp things to say about hypocrites. As we see in this morning's Gospel, Jesus reserves his greatest condemnation for the religiously self-righteous, "the scribes and Pharisees," Jewish leaders in Jesus' day. Given this shared antipathy towards preening religious leaders, you might think that Dawkins might give Jesus a break, but no.

In truth though what Dawkins and what Jesus are against are two different things. When modern-day atheists criticize Christians, it's usually because we fail to live up to the standards we set for others. That is, we act differently than we say we should be. We're two-faced, putting on airs, acting all self-righteous when really we are just as bad as others—we have anger issues, or are addicted to drugs or alcohol, or we cheat or suffer from a bad case of pride. In other words, we don't measure up. To which, we have to say, "Guilty as charged." We are all sinners. We know what we are called to do, but we fall short. And non-Christians are often right to call us out on it. When that happens, we should, we *need* to confess, to admit it.

But that is not what Jesus means in today's lesson when he calls the scribes and Pharisees "hypocrites." Jesus isn't criticizing them for not practicing what they preach, for not walking the talk. The scribes and Pharisees do exactly what they say they should and what they expect others to do. And that's the problem. You see, in Jesus' day, the word "hypocrite" did not originally mean acting better than you are. That sense came later. Originally, "hypocrite" was the name for a stage actor who wore a mask to indicate their part in a Greek play. In calling the Pharisees hypocrites, Jesus was calling them out not so much for pretending but for showing off, showing off their piety, for being literally holier-than-thou.

That's not exactly obvious in this passage, given the focus on hand-washing. We hear this morning's Gospel and we figure the Pharisees were just concerned about having good hygiene, and they couldn't understand why the disciples' mothers didn't teach them better! Only, they had no idea about germs back then. So cleanliness wasn't real the issue. Rather, hand-washing was a ritual act, something the Pharisees did as a religious practice. The Pharisees were known for being sticklers for following the Jewish Law, the commandments, even going beyond what the Torah, the Old Testament, required. Hand-washing was one of those extra rules. The washing of hands was something that God instructed priests to do before serving at the Temple altar. But the

Pharisees, ever eager to show their piety, expanded that rule, applying it to every Jew, not just when making an offering, but before every meal and after every trip to the grocery store. This was a long-standing tradition by Jesus' day, and they couldn't understand why the students of Jesus didn't do the same.

Jesus, though, was not impressed by their *uber*-piety. He understood that their rule-following was not sincere. It didn't come out of true devotion, out of love for God. It came out of fear, fear of God's judgment, and out of a desire for honor. They enjoyed how other Jews would look at them and admire their devotion. It distinguished them, set them apart from Gentiles and other, common Jews, and at the same time make it clear to one and all that they were "good Jews." In other words, their piety was a matter of showing off, to others and likely to themselves.

We know people like this, people who want others to know how good they are, who want you to know which causes they support and what politicians they vote for, and they advertise it with bumper stickers and yard signs. There's an especially apt name for it—it's called "virtue signaling." Both political sides do it, in their own way. And Christians do it too, with Christian flags and What-would-Jesus-do wristbands and pious religious speech.

This is what a lot of people associate with religion, and why it turns people off. The idea that if we just follow the right rules, perform the correct gestures, say the right thing, then that makes us "good people," even if our life at home or at work or in relationships is a disaster.

Jesus has a word for this: "hypocrites," show-offs, performers. The problem isn't that they are something other than they are, as much as it is that who they are is a performance. They are performing for others to see. And that doesn't cut it when it comes to virtue, when it comes to being good in God's eyes.

The problem with the Pharisees, you see, was that they were focused on appearances, on following the external rules. They followed the Pharisaical party line, professed all the right beliefs and positions, admired the right people and hated all the wrong people, and "liked" the right causes on social media, and they thought that was all that was required. But these externals, Jesus tells us, don't really matter. It's not what's goes into the body, or on the body, or on your car, or what you post on Facebook that matters. Rather, what comes out of you, what comes from your heart, that is, how you act—*that* is what matters. It's when we act out of our sinful heart, that is what "defiles" us, marks us as unclean in God's eyes.

Actually, the word translated as "defile" here (*koinoo*) doesn't actually mean to pollute or make unclean, but rather "to make common," as distinct from that which is "set aside as holy or sacred." It's what comes out of us is what makes us not dirty, but common. The implication being that all these evil behaviors that Jesus lists— evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, indecent behavior, envy, slander, pride, folly— while we may say they are sinful, they are also "common," in that they are part of our common, shared, humanity.

But just because they're common doesn't mean they are normal, natural, or what God wants or accepts. For while we share in what is "common" by dint of our common sinfulness, God calls

his people to be different. He says to Israel that they are “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” set apart for God (Exo 19:6). And in 1 Peter, the same is said of the Church, “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God’s own possession” (1 Pet 2:9) We may be common, may share in the inheritance of sin, but we are not to live out of that. We’re not supposed to live out our guts, our appetites. We are supposed to be different, to be holy.

And that holiness, that virtue, our being “good people” is not something that we show off, that is a performance. It is a matter of who we are, or rather what we do. A good person does good, acts good. They don’t need to show it off or tell people about it. People simply notice. What is it Mark Twain said? “Do the right thing. It will gratify some people and astonish the rest.”

That leaves us with one problem. How do we become good people? Because we share in a “common” sinful nature, and our loves are disordered, we can’t do it, can’t be good people, not on our own. We need God, we need his grace, the grace that we receive when we come together in fellowship as a church, when we read the Scriptures together, when we sing hymns and receive absolution of our sins, when we receive the sacraments. Without God’s grace, we can’t be good people.

This makes Christianity something of a paradox: Christianity is both true religion and the end of religion. It is the end of the religion, in the sense that it proclaims the end of our efforts to make ourselves right with God. “If the cross is the sign of anything,” Robert Capon writes, “it’s the sign that God has gone out of the religion business and solved all of the world’s problems without requiring a single human being to do a single religious thing.”

But at the same time Christianity is true religion, in the sense that it is by practicing this faith—praying, singing, confessing, communing—that God gives us the grace to be good people. Now that doesn’t happen automatically, or easily. But gradually, sometimes imperceptively, in fits and starts, God changes us, transforms us, makes us more into Christ’s image, so that we live not out of evil, selfish desires, but out of love and grace.

We can try to show off how good we are, but we are not fooling God. God doesn’t just want us to look good or seem good, he wants us to *be* good people, holy people. And in Christ, he has made that possible. With God’s grace, we can become not just performers, showoffs. We can become the people this world needs us to be, the people God wants us to be, the people we were meant to be. Thanks be to God!