The Second Reading

Exhortation

This letter draws more from Jesus’ teaching than any other letter in the New Testament. It urges us to live justly and morally because Christ will hold us accountable for our actions (5:8-9). There is no time to waste as we seek to know and live God’s word.

Good gifts

By insisting that God gives good gifts, James pointedly rejects the notion that God tempts people to sin (see vv.13-14). On the contrary, the one who gave us light itself acts with unfailing goodness (v.17).

In desiring only good for people, God brings them to new life through baptism and the proclamation of his word (v.18). Like the first crops gathered during a harvest, those who heed God’s word are sure to enter eternal life.

Doers of the word

God’s word challenges us to live differently. As we hear God calling us to change the way we speak and act, James warns us not to ignore what we’ve heard.

God’s word, like the Christian religion itself, demands radical action. We should help others, especially those in need. In the Old Testament orphans and widows represent the weakest members of society.

James also warns us not to conform to the values of our culture (the world).
THE GOSPEL READING

Pharisees

Pharisees seem to mean “separated one.” Pharisees drew from both the laws in the Jewish scriptures and other teachings in order to help their fellow Jews preserve their identity and traditions during the Roman occupation of their land.

Pharisees represent only one form of Judaism. Their mostly negative portrayal in our Gospels reflects a later stage of conflict between Jews and Christians. Some Pharisees were compassionate and just and inspired others to act likewise.

Ritual purity

Hand-washing and purifying refer to ritual cleansing not personal hygiene. Jewish law stipulated that objects and people be ritually purified in certain circumstances, such as for use in worship.

The Pharisees seem to have made ritual hand-washing before every meal a requirement for all Jews. Their expansion of this law is an example of the tradition of the elders.

Contesting authority

When the Pharisees ask Jesus about hand-washing, they’re really asking him to justify his entire ministry. They question whether he truly speaks for God.

Jesus responds by first quoting a passage from Isaiah in order to indicate that the Pharisees have taken over rules about holiness so completely that they’ve lost touch with what God wants. By quoting scripture, Jesus also indicates that he is the true teacher of God’s law.

Rendering holy

Jesus next echoes a big theme of the Jewish scriptures: worship is meaningless, even sacrilegious, if the worshiper doesn’t act justly and morally.

However, when Jesus declares that nothing from outside can defile a person, he contradicts scripture, which now makes him seem unfaithful to God’s law. There are two reasons he speaks so boldly.

• As God’s Son, Jesus has authority over God’s law. Therefore, he’s the only one who can correctly interpret or change it.
• Jesus brings about a new era of salvation in which he purifies people. Therefore, the criteria of holiness in this new era is obedience to Jesus.

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

Reading closely

1. Why might the Pharisees and scribes have come from Jerusalem to see Jesus?
2. What might these religious authorities have expected Jesus to say?
3. What all do you think Jesus’ disciples felt about the presence of these other authority figures?
4. What effect might Jesus’ use of scripture have had on the religious authorities?
5. What concerns run through this passage?
6. If the discussion continued, what might the Pharisees and scribes have said next?
7. How might the disciples have reacted to Jesus’ teaching in this passage?

Living the word

8. What does it mean to be religious?
9. Do you want to be thought of as religious?
10. How does each of the sins that Jesus names affect individuals and communities?
11. When have you followed your own rules instead of God’s laws?

PRAYER

Father of light,
Giver of all that is good,
you share your Spirit with us
and invite us to participate in your work of renewing the world.

Keep us attentive to your word.
Gently reveal the ways we resist doing what is just and moral.
Forgive us when we know what is right but fail to act accordingly.
Help us distinguish between the values of the world and the values of your kingdom, and help us persevere in upholding your will.

In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.