

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Fr. Samuel Springuel

1 September, 2024

1st Reading Deuteronomy 4:1–2,6–8

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 15:2–3,3–4,4–5

2nd Reading James 1:17–18,21b–22,27

Gospel Mark 7:1–8,14–15,21–23

Throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees get a bad rap. While Jesus’s antagonists are identified as belonging to three groups, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, it is the Pharisees which seem to be the mentioned most often and who are explicitly called out for condemnation most often. As a result, the image we have of the Pharisees is very negative. They are hypocrites (a term Jesus himself uses when condemning them): people so obsessed with what the Law said that they paid no attention to what it meant. This view of them is even embedded in our language where we have the word “pharisaic” which Dictionary.com defines as “practicing or advocating strict observance of external forms and ceremonies of religion or conduct without regard to the spirit.” There is no equivalent word derived from the scribes or the Sadducees.

The thing is, I’m not sure this view is entirely fair. The Pharisees, after all, based their practices on a profound respect for the Torah, God’s Law. The Law, given by God through Moses, was a direct expression of God’s wisdom. They took to heart Moses’s injunction from today’s first reading and sought to follow the Law in every respect. Since the Law was God’s wisdom made manifest, how could they not? Indeed, so important was the Law, that even accidental violations of it were to be avoided. After all, since the Law expressed God’s will, any violation, whether purposeful or accidental, was therefore against God’s will, a sin. All the practices of the Pharisees, therefore, were intended to avoid sin, to ensure that those following them would always live in accord with God’s will.

Let me give you a modern example of how they thought. I’m sure everyone of us here who drives has gone over the speed limit at some point in our lives. It may have only been by a few miles an hour, not enough for even a traffic camera to bother issuing a ticket, but we’ve still violated that limit and probably haven’t thought much of it. Now imagine you worked for one of those companies with a GPS tracker in every vehicle. I’m sure you’ve seen them about, they often have

a bumper sticker that says something like “Vehicle speed monitored by GPS” or “Vehicle monitored by GPS, The speed limit will be followed.” Further, this company has a policy that whenever the system detects you speeding, it assess a fine, docks your wages for the time spent speeding. Under such circumstances it would be quite natural for you to change the way you drive to make sure you never violated the speed limit. Instead of setting your cruise control to the speed limit on the highway, where any slight downhill might have you speeding, you’d probably set it to a few miles per hour below the limit. When driving about town at speeds too slow or irregular for the use of cruise control, you’d be hyper aware of what the speed limit was wherever you were and if you were ever unsure as to what the speed limit actually was (is it 25 or 30 miles per hour on this street?), you’d opt for the lower number just to be on the safe side. You might even spend time making sure the maps your employer used to determine what the speed limit was on various roads were fully up to date and didn’t have sections where it thought the speed limit was 25 even though the signs on that road clearly say 35.

This kind of modification of individual behavior was what the Pharisees were setting out to do and they took this very seriously. After all, they weren’t talking about some simple traffic rule and a boss with too much micromanagement technology at his fingertips. They were talking about the Law laid out by God himself the following of which ensured the flourishing of Israel. With such high stakes, they could, and did, justify some fairly strict practices. The practice of washing hands from today’s Gospel, for instance, was a precaution against having been contaminated by coming into contact with something or someone unclean. Uncleaness was contagious, after all, and you never knew what the people you came into contact with in the market had been doing before they met you. The Pharisees fully realized that they couldn’t account for everything that everyone else was doing. Why take the chance that someone you had accidentally bumped into was unclean and had contaminated you when you could simply clean yourself just to be sure.

And we know that Jesus himself taught along similar lines. When teaching about adultery, he declared that a man who merely “looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” He declared that not only should we refrain from false oaths, but should avoid swearing at all. Instead of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” he said, “when someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other to him as well.” We are called not to “love your neighbor and hate your enemy,” but to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Each of these teachings, and there are others I haven’t mentioned, takes a precept of the Law and amplifies it, calling on us, Jesus’s followers, to a form of behavior that doesn’t just conform to God’s Law, but ensures that even our mistakes will come no where close to violating it.

The problem with the Pharisees, then, is less in what they do, as in how they do it. They had succumbed to a sort of preventionist maximalism. An almost OCD tendency to focus on their precautions, all the things they did to avoid violating the Law, that they forgot what the Law was for: the flourishing of Israel. They failed to realize that obsessing over their precautions all the

time wasn't flourishing; in many ways it was the exact opposite of flourishing. This is why Jesus was so adamant in calling them out. Not because they didn't care about the Law (they did), not because they wanted to violate it (they very much didn't), but because they seemed to care more about the Law than about the people that the Law was supposed to protect and support.

We must be careful, however, not to go so far as to say the Law doesn't matter. Jesus himself declared that he had come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. And so we have today's reading from St. James. He warns us not to succumb to a sort of intellectual minimalism. It is not enough to say "I believe" or "the Law of the Lord is wisdom." We must also act on those beliefs, use our knowledge of the Law of the Lord to inform our actions.

I'm a Benedictine and my community founded and continues take an active role in the running of a school for boys grades 6 through 12. One of the things that sets our School apart from the myriad of other school options parents have in DC is that we make a point of educating not just our boys minds, but their bodies and spirits as well. Some of that takes obvious forms, such as the inclusion of physical education and sports into our curriculum and the regular offering of Mass and Reconciliation in our schedule. But it also takes more subtle forms. Every fall our student government sponsors a food drive (and makes a competition out of it), encouraging our students to feed the hungry. In the spring we have a drive to collect toiletries and basic clothing for the homeless, thereby getting them to clothe the naked. Through these activities, and others like them, we are teaching our students to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only."

Now, you are not any of my students, but allow me to give you a little something to take home for reflection, a homework assignment, if you will. What is your relation to God's Law? Do you believe it? Do you know it? Do you do it? If God's Law is truly the wisdom that Moses describes it as, and if you truly believe that, you must put it into action. Not out of some sort of quid pro quo obligation or the threat of punishment if you don't, but because the wisdom of God promotes flourishing: your flourishing. Right action affirms our belief and adds to our knowledge. Right belief whets our curiosity and drives us to action. Right knowledge confirms our beliefs and informs our actions. They are the three legs of the stool that supports our life. If we are lacking in even one of them, we are doomed to fall and end up with a very sore bum indeed.