

**The Rev. Jon Hauerwas – August 29, 2021- From Within  
James 1:17-27 and Mark 7 (selected verses)**

When we engage in conversation with someone, and tell them that we are a Christian, one of the first questions, though not usually vocalized, is whether or not we are faithful to those teachings. You can see the wheels turning in their minds as they consider what we have said and what we have done. Do we appear to be judgmental or loving? Spiteful or kind? Intent on preserving our own self-interest, or filled with a spirit of generosity? At a fundamental level, they want to know if there is goodness within us.

And in the midst of these encounters, we are like adolescents with newfound awareness of how we are perceived by others - analyzing these interactions in real time, and wondering if our conversation partner is a person of faith. If she is not, then she likely has some history with other followers of Jesus. Rightly, we wonder what those experiences were like. Has she born the wrath of those wielding the mallet of self-righteous indignation? You know the type. Those who are eager to rebuke all who might rise up and challenge one's so-called God-given authority. With Bible in hand, they can easily point to the chapter and verse, declaring, "It says right here," as if their own interpretation of scripture should effectively end all debate.

Others whom we encounter have come to believe that Christianity has more to do with geography, and cultural bias, and political affiliation, than with anything that is modeled in the life and teachings of Jesus. They pointedly say that we are hypocrites, and they insist that we have forgotten about the plight of the poor, the needs of the marginalized, the cries of the people. In their eyes, our witness is ineffective, insincere, misguided. And we, as practitioners of a grand illusion, are to be met with skepticism, doubt, and mistrust.

Knowing that some of our neighbors hold these opinions, we often choose to avoid the topic of faith altogether. In the interest of offending no one, our lips remain sealed when we might provide an accounting of our own deeply held religious convictions. And yet, as we live, and work, and engage as those with no visible faith at all, we continue to feel surprised when our witness is curtailed, when our testimony lacks power, and when our work on behalf of the Kingdom of God is blighted. Amid our silence, were we really expecting a different outcome?

There is an alternative, of course, to that tendency which many scholars call “practical atheism.” And that is to love, in *both* word and in deed, not only our friends, but strangers, as well. To do what we say that we will do. To serve others as

Christ served. To seek opportunities to give of ourselves. To speak kindly. To forgive. To go the extra mile. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Many of you are aware that following college, I spent one year as a volunteer in mission service on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). That work took me to Edinburgh, Scotland, where I served at a homeless hostel. In the middle of the night, one of our residents came to front desk and told me, “I don’t believe in God. And, besides, you Christians are all just a bunch of hypocrites, anyway.” My initial thought was, “you’ve got to be kidding, right? Here I am in a foreign country, volunteering my time. I am present with you in the early hours of the morning when I could be sleeping like a normal person. And you want to tell me that I’m a hypocrite? Wow.”

Then, I remembered his station in life. And as I considered the underlying truth of what he was saying, for we are all hypocrites, I responded that there is no better place for a hypocrite than in the church, because the church offers an alternative way of life. Friends, we are not called to be perfect. We are called to be faithful. As Paul reminds us, we are not to go on sinning in order that grace might abound. No. We are to take our mistakes in stride, to confess our shortcomings, and

to endeavor to do better the next time. This is what it means to pursue justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

In the commission of our faith, we will all fall short. Inevitably, we will hurt other people. But in the midst of those missteps, we have the opportunity to right wrongs, and to seek reconciliation to the best of our abilities, and for the glory of God. Yet, to accomplish this goal requires nothing less than complete honesty about who and whose we are.

Let me give you another example of what I mean. America is a global leader in many ways. As a result, not all hold a favorable view of our country or our people. As we engage with global neighbors, there is a temptation for many traveling abroad to tell the locals that they are Canadian. And while some who do this harbor concerns about their own safety, dozens of others have told me that they also do not wish to bear the weight of other's judgements.

But consider this. If we are to stand any chance of changing the hearts and minds of others about what it means to be a Christian or an American, then it is incumbent upon us to set that tone, and to model these identities well. Only then will we challenge the negative stereotypes that others wish to assign to us. Only then will

others have the opportunity to view us as people of good will and integrity. And only then will we become true ambassadors of the goodness that dwells within, confident in the knowledge that it is what flows from our hearts which will ultimately define us. Friends, may you live courageously and resist hypocrisy until they know that we are Christians by our love. Amen.