

## Actions Speak Louder than Words

[James 1:17-27](#), [Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

It seems strange to me how often we can get tangled up in the details. It is easy to overlook the obvious victories and focus in on the minute flaws or failures. I know I have struggled with this when my kids would bring home report cards. No matter how many good grades were on that sheet, if there was one bad one, that's the one I tended to hone in on. If we are not careful, we could easily lose the good within the criticisms.

There is a famous comedian, maybe you've heard of him, who uses a similar approach. He believes people in general do not function at full brain capacity most of the time, and feel the need to state the obvious. Hence, he responds with a quirky reply and finishes with his famous line, "Here's your sign." The sign says, "I'm stupid." Mr. Engvall shares a story of a truck that most obviously got stuck under an overpass because the

truck was too tall. And of course, someone stops by and says the obvious, “Did you get stuck?” Of course, Mr. Engvall’s pithy response is, “Nope. I was delivering this overpass and ran out of gas! Here’s your sign.”

Some of the points of today’s gospel lesson may not be as obvious, as we need to put today’s scriptures in context. First, this story of the Pharisees criticizing Jesus’ disciples comes directly on the heels of a significant event. Jesus had just fed a multitude with five barley loaves and two fish. Next, he continued to heal the sick and provided valuable teaching to the masses. He then proceeded to rescue the disciples as they were caught in a sudden storm at sea, and Jesus was seen walking on water. So the Pharisees and scribes had most likely witnessed at least some of these miracles, yet they could only focus on the fact that the disciples did not wash their hands before they ate.

For us looking back this seems a bit absurd. Shouldn't they be focusing on the good Jesus was doing in their midst? Shouldn't they be seeing the lives that were being changed – the fact that ostracized citizens were now able to become viable members of society again? Shouldn't they be focusing on the good instead of criticizing the minutia? Perhaps the Pharisees were suffering from Mr. Engvall's disease of not being able to see the obvious.

I think we need to go a little deeper into the story. Understand that the Pharisees descended from the Israelites that had been exiled to Babylon. They were encouraged to be a called out and separate people. They were trying to reconnect with God after having fallen to sin and corruption. Strict adherence to food laws and cleanliness laws was simply a part of their very being. It is no wonder they had reason to question

Jesus as the Messiah when he came off as something completely unexpected. They were prepared to receive a king and what they saw was a carpenter's son cavorting with his disciples who were plagued with bad table manners.

It is interesting to me that we are not simply talking about a concern for cleanliness. The scripture tells us that the Pharisees would go to great lengths to show how pure and holy they were. They would not just wash up in an isolated manner but with great show and in public for all to see. It was important for them to show the world they were set apart and in their minds more holy than all others. And this ritual did not just include washing their hands but all their cooking and eating utensils – all done in public and done with great care. This was important to them as they believed these rituals brought them closer to God.

But once again Jesus turned tradition on its ear.

Unfortunately while the Pharisees and scribes were focused on their personal cleanliness as a means to Godliness, they forgot all other aspects of God's expectations. God wants us to be doers of the word and not hearers only. All throughout Israel's history, God made a point of stating the importance of caring for the outcasts, the poor, the widows, and the orphans. Where was that concern from the Pharisees? Could they not see the obvious – that through feeding the masses and healing the sick and teaching of love for neighbor, Jesus was embodying the very word of God?

The other part of the story is that the Pharisees were genuinely concerned for the spiritual well being of their society. Understand they were once again living in occupied territory. The Romans had taken over their sacred land. The Pharisees

truly believed that if they were able to become a holy people, God would bless them and eliminate the Romans as God had eliminated many of their enemies in the past. Their history was filled with stories of how God had prevailed in their midst and enemies were thrown down along with their false gods. But in order for that to happen, God had to be pleased with them. They had to maintain their holiness in order to achieve victory over Rome.

Jesus made a habit of breaking down barriers, including those that separated the holy ones from those considered unclean. Jesus did not adhere to the food and cleanliness laws, otherwise he would have never called Matthew, a known tax collector, and he most certainly would not be seen with Gentiles or prostitutes or sinners. But how could Jesus show compassion for the poor and outcasts of society if he did not relate with the

poor and outcasts of society? Surely every time Jesus laid hands on someone to provide healing he was violating the cleanliness laws. Jesus was reminding the Pharisees of the fulfillment of God's law – love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. Our love for God should extend to others as naturally as our arms extend from our bodies. We are not concerned with someone's worthiness to receive God's grace – we are concerned with helping members of our community find a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. There's a familiar song that says, "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me. And that thou bidst me come to thee. O lamb of God I come, I come." There are no conditions placed on coming forward and accepting God's grace. We don't have to clean up our act first to be worthy to accept God's love for us. We cannot earn God's love with acts of kindness. We receive God's love as a gift freely given. Once

we have stepped forward to receive this gift, our actions will truly speak louder than words. The change in us is obvious. Our attitudes do not match that of the world. Our focus is no longer on getting ahead, or beating down others to gain wealth, or looking out for number one. We are the children of God, chosen for a purpose. We are not afraid to welcome others regardless of their past sins and mistakes. We are here to extend the hand of God's grace to the outcasts, the downtrodden, the discouraged, and the lost. Our actions say to them, "God loves you, and so do we."

As we go from this place to face the challenges of this week, consider the ways in which you are extending God's love to others. Are you taking a break from your busy schedule to let someone talk to you about a family struggle? Are you offering a smile and a kind word to someone who can't seem to fit in with

everyone else? Are you finding yourself picking up the phone and calling someone just because for some reason that person was on your mind? Maybe through our acts of kindness to others, we may also be handing out our own sign. Let us go from this place and remind our community of one obvious fact. “Here’s your sign – God loves you, and so do I.” Let the church say, ‘Amen’.