

## *Faith in Sync*

Psalm 15      James 1: 17-27

I mentioned last week how my over 10 year old personal computer, a big, heavy workstation had a final “thermal event.” Something somewhere in the system was registering an unacceptably high heat reading. There could have been a half dozen different causes. I deemed it smarter to admit that the old beast was an old beast, and that it was time to fire up the back-up computer. Getting things back in sync on the old PC wasn’t a worthwhile investment of time and effort.

I had bought the back-up computer a couple of years ago for a song, under \$100. (This reminds me that now I need to get *another* back-up computer.) This computer is also over 10 years old. But it has a small form factor so that it fits nicely on my desk underneath my monitor. However, I had forgotten that it was so cheap because it had no hard drive. Still, I must have known it at the time because I had an unused large hard drive among my parts, still sealed in its packaging. So I went to work getting everything set up.

From prior experience, I had learned that storing my needed files on a hard drive was an invitation to disaster, having had many hard drives lose their functionality over the years. Losing access even temporarily to my vital files is a problem, so I’ve stored most files on multiple cloud drives. I can get those files from any computer or device with an internet connection.

All I had to do was connect to the cloud drives on the newly operational back-up computer. One of the features that these cloud drives have in common is the ability to synchronize files between the computer and the cloud so that they’re in both places and updated at the same time any changes are made. That’s very helpful.

Not thinking too far ahead, I proceeded to click the sync option for Google Drive, One Drive, and Dropbox in the space of a minute or two. As they went to work, there was so much being processed by all three cloud drives that all the rest of my computer’s functions ground to a painful crawl for the rest of the day, as in ‘click,’ wait a *full* minute, then click again. Getting in sync took time and effort, but it was worth it ultimately.

Continuing almost seamlessly from last week, we continue to explore getting in alignment, in sync, between our faith beliefs and our faith actions. Things do get out of sync with our spiritual compass. We think we’re headed on a magnetic north direction as sure as anything, only to find out that we’ve gone completely astray and need to figure out what went wrong.

[A study was done](#) by University of Notre Dame sociologists on people who say that they tithe to their churches. A biblical “tithe” is supposed to mean 10% of income, but for many folks it means something quite different, even though they still call it a “tithe.” Apparently only 3% of people who *say* they tithe (only 3%!) actually give more than 5% of their earnings to their church. My guess is that the number of people who

actually tithing 10% is so ridiculously small, they couldn't find a meaningful measure. The study finds that people who *say* they tithe, but are not even close to an actual tithe in their giving, have made themselves immune to appeals to donate a genuine tithe. They're sure that message is **not** for them because in their mind, they "tithe" ... only they don't, but they're convinced that they do. Researchers call it a level of "comfortable guilt;" maybe a *little* guilty about their giving, but not enough to feel the need to do anything *more*. It makes perfect sense, and that's where the trouble lies.

At least the study shows that at some level in our faith life, we *want* to be in sync with what we're supposed to be doing, even if we're not doing it. The whole idea of our scriptures is to help us do that, recognizing the complexity of the things we need to get aligned and synchronized.

Psalms 15 begins with the question, *Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?* It is called a 'psalm of entry,' posing the question of those who come before the awesome majesty of God's presence in the great Temple of Jerusalem. The psalmist asks, in essence, 'how do I know if I am worthy of entering this place, of coming before my God?' And in the broader sense: 'How do I live the faithful life that would render me worthy of dwelling with the Most High?'

The answer again is not what a worshiper does *within* the Temple, but by the conduct and attitude of the faithful *outside* the Temple. In other words, you have no place coming before the Lord God in the Temple if your daily life is not a solid reflection of what God seeks from his people.

This means walking blamelessly, acting righteously, and then speaking – with a variety of conditions placed on the type of communication; speaking heartfelt truths, no slanders, no slurs, and keeping one's oath, even when it hurts. At the end, it also suggests that you better not be greedy, charging usurious interest when lending, or accepting a bribe to betray the innocent.

These instructions are pretty broad. Their lack of specificity prohibits us from using them as any kind of legal behavioral code – thank goodness! In broad strokes, it sets a priority on conducting human relations in an open, fair, and just manner. If a believer's conduct has, as its foundation, a committed orientation to engage human relations in an open, fair, and just manner, that person recognizes the essential way of God's kingdom.

There may be a whole lot more to develop from that foundation, a progressive journey to be undertaken that will teach deeper lessons about faithfulness and spirituality, but the basics are relating to others in an open, fair, and just manner. This is the foundation as the closing verse says: *Whoever does these things will never be shaken*. That's a foundation.

As far as getting synchronized with a faith worthy of the kingdom, we are once again pointed outside the walls of the sanctuary and into the world where our daily lives become the walking-talking expression of faithfulness. Once again, what happens within

the sanctuary alone can't vouch for your righteousness and worthiness before God. Better that you had been open, fair, and just in your conduct outside the sanctuary, and then *never* sought to enter it; God would be happier!

James' epistle has the same concerns since the faithful of his day have become concerned about their righteous standing before God also, the same concern voiced in Psalm 15. However, for the early Christians in James' time, their concern pertains to their standing when the *Day of Judgment* comes. Are they going to be deemed righteous before God at that time?

The people to whom James writes seem to have heard about the apostle Paul and his claim that justification before God is by faith, not by works. They may be very reluctant then to value **any** form of pious activity, not even wanting to **appear** to value works as having any merit. Give people a little bit of instruction and they can utterly freak out. "I wouldn't want to be doing something as if it meant something, because that would be wrong and corrupting." It may seem silly to us, but some of these folks thought that if they didn't have a pure heart, mind, and spirit, then they'd be eternally condemned.

James aims to moderate this literalism and extremism – this freak out – and balance this new kind of Christian purity code with an ethic of conduct and behavior.

In our passage, James begins by focusing on God, and God's many blessings to his faithful. He notes that God in Christ recognized and designated his faithful as a kind of firstfruits of the Kingdom. This sets up the validity of this purity code that they're relating, the notion that one must be pure and righteous for the imminent Day of Judgment. But it also reminds the reader, *Every good and perfect gift is from above*. In other words, **you** will not create the good and perfect gift of life on the Day of Judgment. **God** will provide every good and perfect thing for each faithful believer; it is not up to **you** to produce anything. That heads off one wrong-headed direction.

Still, James is quickly shifting gears. He wants to introduce a synchronization of faithful action with faithful heart and mind. Again, the starting, primary focus is on relations and communications; quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. That's not far off from Psalm 15.

Then he switches back to the purity code; *get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent*, but adds another element saying: *and humbly accept the word that is planted in you, which can save you*.

Now James calls attention to the word, the seed, the yeast, the kingdom blessing planted within each believer. It begs the questions, what do we do with this strange and mysterious blessing within us? Is it like *Alien*, desperate to get out? No, but it's rather curious since the faithful **can** pay it proper attention, but **can act** like it never existed.

James has drawn the reader into the nature of the word; it is not for hearing only, not for praying only, not for reading only. Rather the word should find its reflection in

your life, just as you see yourself in a mirror. With the word, you should see not your common, earthly self in the mirror, but you in the image of the kingdom blessing that God intended you to be. Instead, what happens, the faithful turn away from the mirror never seeing God's word, God's promise, God's blessing in themselves. They don't sync their attitudes and actions to this image. Going forward, they act as if the word did **not** exist within them.

James insists that the believer must not forget or neglect, *but **doing it, will be blessed in what he **does*****. It is in action – the doing – that the believer faithfully reflects God's word, God's blessing, planted within. Not in hearing, praying, singing, worshiping, reading, or anything else, but the promise of the word is fulfilled in the act of **doing** as a daily activity ingrained in the way of a person's life.

He closes by synchronizing the purity code and the demand for an action-based, daily-lived faithfulness. He says: *Religion that our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: **to look after the widows and the orphans in their distress*** – in other words, actively sharing your blessing for the healing, reconciliation, and salvation of others, the least in the world who are of God's special concern – **and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world**.

This balance which James proposes actually shows to readers that both the personal purity code and the active engagement of ministry to others are **both** necessary. We see this in the activist monastic orders, Franciscans and Jesuits where personal devotions are balanced with active engagement in offering Christ's face to the world, carrying it forward from the morning mirror.

The purity code has adapted to different conditions over two millennia, of course. Today's purity emphasis comes in being knowledgeable, disciplined, and spiritually vigorous. But it functions the same way, trying to establish oneself within the walls of spiritual strength, protected from the corruptions and manipulations of the world.

But neither Jesus nor James validates such cloistering. One's spiritual strength is only realized and fulfilled when it is taken out into the world, ministering in the Lord's name and placing oneself among his weak, poor, and vulnerable people.

James calls for us to maintain a similar kind of balance in our faith lives today, one that esteems and values the spiritual disciplines that enhance personal spiritual strength and standing, but synchronized with the active engagement of the hurting world to which Jesus ministered and emptied himself with love and compassion. When our witness is synchronized, the way of the Lord is reflected within us and we see his promise in our mirror each and every day.