

Homily for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Saturday, September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018  
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Where our hearts are, there also lies your treasure. Make no mistake about it, God is after our hearts! He cares more about what happens on the inside of our lives than what happens on the outside. That's what he's trying to explain to the Pharisees, and to all his disciples in our Gospel today. And it's what he wants to explain to us, too. It is quite possible to appear perfectly Christian on the outside while being perfectly selfish on the inside. We can go to Mass regularly, avoid obviously lewd or sinful behavior in public, say prayers so that others will notice - we can do all those things on the outside while constantly entertaining evil thoughts and self-centered desires in our hearts. That kind of divided life, which is called hypocrisy, can't last, though. As the old saying goes, unless we live according to what we believe, we will soon start believing in accordance with what we live. True followers of Jesus Christ can never be satisfied with merely exterior piety; we can never consider ourselves superior to others just because our sins are less visible. That's what the Pharisees did, and it blinded them to God's love; in fact, it tragically turned them into enemies of God. True religion has exterior manifestations, certainly, but they are meant to flow from and

give expression to the experience of the heart. The heart is the place where we decide for or against our conscience, for or against God's will. Our friendship with him, and the purpose, strength, and vigor that flows out of that friendship, depend on our inner allegiance to him; looking like goody-two-shoes on the outside can never substitute for that. Jesus doesn't care what we look like to others; he cares about who we really are. And so, that's what we should care about too. When St. James writes, in today's Second Reading, that true and pure religion consists of caring for orphans and widows and keeping oneself "unstained by the world," isn't he contradicting what Jesus says in the Gospel?

Jesus condemns the Pharisees' emphasis on the outward appearances of religion. He asserts clearly and forcefully that what matters more is the interior, the heart. But St. James seems to be doing just the opposite, focusing on exterior actions and neglecting interior attitudes. Who is right? Both are right; they are not actually contradicting each other; it's only an apparent contradiction. This is one reason why it's so dangerous to try and interpret individual verses or sections of the Bible on our own. That approach to the faith has contributed to countless and tragic divisions among Christians, and even wars, throughout the centuries. The message of the Bible is the message of God's salvation, and individual sections of the scriptures can only be accurately interpreted in light of the whole story. And it is through the

Church, established by Jesus and guided by the Holy Spirit, that God makes sure an accurate interpretation happens.

In this case, St. James and our Lord are both emphasizing the same truth, but they are doing it from different angles, kind of like instant replay from different views. And which truth are they emphasizing? That following Jesus means following his teaching with our whole person: heart, mind, and body, not just going through the motions, not just putting on appearances. Both sin and sanctity have their roots in our hearts, their branches in our attitudes, and their fruits in our freely chosen actions. This is exactly what St James is getting at when he writes: "Be doers of the word, not hearers only."

All of us here today call ourselves Catholics. And so, we all should be striving to live as Catholics. Christ is our light! Let that light shine in our hearts, first! This means at least two things. It means that we never stop trying to think, speak, and behave as Jesus Christ would want us to. It's not a question of eliminating all of our self-centered and sinful attitudes, words, and actions in one fell swoop. Rather, it's a question of our ongoing efforts. Camille always says to me that our spiritual life, in this sense, is like a garden. A good gardener can never simply abandon the garden to itself, even if the good plants are healthy and strong. To make the garden fulfill its purpose, a gardener has to water, fertilize, protect, and weed on a regular basis. We too have to continuously strive

to know Christ and shape our lives according to his standards, on a regular, ongoing basis. If we stop making our effort, the weeds will take over.

It also means accepting and embracing all of the Church's official teaching, not just the bits and pieces that we feel personally fond of. A cafeteria Catholic, someone who picks and chooses among Catholic doctrine the way we pick and choose food items in a cafeteria, is not being a faithful Catholic. Certainly, we need to educate ourselves about all that the Catechism teaches, and that means, sometimes, honestly facing difficulties. But those doctrines are not optional; they are part of the deposit of faith, part of what God has revealed to us for our salvation. He is the doctor; we are only patients; and our health and happiness depend on following the doctor's orders. When we receive the Body of Christ today, let us remember that it is us who must be heart first Catholics if we are to sow true faith where there is doubt in this world. It is us who must be heart first Catholics if we wish to sow love where there is hate. It is us who must be heart first Catholics if we want to be dependable, truthful, conscious followers of Christ because we all know, where your heart is there also lies your treasure!