

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Aug 25th 2015

Ever wonder why there are so many gospel stories featuring the Pharisees in a role antagonistic to Jesus? The Pharisees were morally and religiously upright people, a reform party in Judaism concerned with restoring Jewish worship to its true roots. So why do the Gospels cast the Pharisees in such a negative light? The answer is that Phariseism is the besetting sin of all religiously observant church groups, not just in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, but in all the Christian denominations ever since. Today's gospel captures the essence of their mistake – neglecting the weightier things of the law – judgment and mercy and fidelity. Religiously observant Christians are tempted to the same error. Observing the fine points of the regulations is not how we earn God's favor. We already have that; rather these "fine points" are simply descriptions of how someone who is consumed by mercy and fidelity would typically behave.

In Mark's version of this exchange (Mk 7:9), Jesus accuses the Pharisees this way: "How ingeniously you get around the commandments of God in order to observe your own tradition!" Are we guilty of the same error? Have we ingeniously found ways to justify, for example, our disagreements about *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment? ("Well, he's not an economist, after all . . ."). In a few months we'll have the Synod on the family. It's too early to predict what it will propose. But are we ready to face up to our discomfort if the Synod were to propose changes in doctrines that some might have thought unchangeable – teachings that in the case of the Pharisees Jesus might have called "your own traditions". Are we comfortable if we find that they are not unchangeable after all, that they may not be so "weighty" as mercy and justice . . .

Clearly today's gospel invites us, pious observant Christians, to stand in the shoes of the Pharisees for a while. Do they fit? Is Jesus' criticism applicable to us? It's worth thinking about – praying about.

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