

**Sermon Notes – September 1, 2024**  
**The Holy Gospel of St. Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23**  
**Peace Lutheran Church**  
**“Human Customs and God's Divine Law”**

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, then the road to heaven is paved with deeds of loving kindness to orphans and the widows. Too often the gospel is reduced to assenting to the right thoughts, or cooking up the requisite heartfelt emotions. All three of our readings push us to embrace the true freedom of the gospel; rejoicing in God's goodness to us that overflows in zeal to share the Father's bounty with others.

With whom do we delight in sharing? Youth in our congregation who have gone on a mission event at some point have had some powerful stories about sharing with others. Even in a place as barren as the desert, Moses in Deuteronomy preaches a God who invites the people to open wide their hands. There in the desert, they remember a God of compassion who has liberated their grandparents from slavery. Now they receive this same God, who calls them to treasure his bounteous ways - all the way to their own grandchildren. Here is the substance of Moses' preaching: True freedom is found not in good intentions but in compassionate action and connection with others. Live your life in the freedom of a compassionate God, who is always near.

We consider James, who sees the law as not being opposed to the gospel, but as simply shorthand for the treasured teaching of the freedom we have in Christ to serve our neighbors. When it comes to accepting outsiders, James is truly a fearless champion of compassion. Every community and congregation has outsiders who have been pushed away or are at least distant. Who are the outsiders, the “widows and orphans” of our community? Are we always taking the time to hear their stories? Are we engaging those who have been pushed aside because of their economic status, or other things that might make them different from us? James calls us to embrace the freedom to speak for justice on their behalf.

The omitted verses of the gospel lectionary, Mark 7: 9-13, provide an illustration of the gospel's freedoms to bear fruit in love for neighbor. The perfect freedom of honoring and caring for one's parents is greater than the burden of laws (even religious ones) that draw lines between who gets cared for and who does not. As Jesus summarizes in verses 14-15, we are very good at making up religious rules that, in our efforts to control our lives, end up limiting our compassion for others. Let that digest for a moment!

For the Christian, even though these texts are about the freedom to act compassionately, the temptation to please some by placating the hard edges of today's readings may be close at hand. But does sidestepping the hard stuff really lead to freedom? A great purpose of gathering in God's presence is to face and deal with “what we've done and left undone.” Let that digest for a bit.

With the love of Jesus to protect us, and the example of Jesus to guide us, we are made free to go in peace and serve our neighbors in need. Such is the religion and worship that is pure.