

Mark 7:14–23

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 28 August 2012

Piety and alcohol are alike in this way: in moderation they both do some good, at least allegedly. But if you start depending on them, relying on them, they turn to poison quick as a wink.

Pieties are personal disciplines undertaken by the self for the sake of the life of faith. They are chosen, resolved upon, and carried out as habits or some such. There used to be a whole lot of them commonly held among Lutherans: Bible study; prayer at strategic times of the day, on rising, before meals, at suppertime, and so forth. There were strictures about alcohol, of course, and about cursing, about gambling and playing cards, and about other forms of behavior. The habits forbidden were not necessarily evil, but they were recognized as dangerous, and the community agreed to accept these disciplines. In fact people identified themselves with them, and they served a good purpose. When faith is deep and thriving, it has a practically unlimited appetite for Scripture. But when faith grows a little cool, we don't necessarily read because we want to, and so we make resolutions that say, "I'm going to do it anyway." That's a good thing.

But when piety becomes pietism, just as when alcohol becomes alcoholism, these disciplines provide a way of measuring and judging. A real Christian, someone who is genuinely ninety-nine and forty-four hundredths percent committed, is someone who reads Scripture daily and prays before meals. And if you don't, well, your faith is in question. Piety is like that. It wants to become ultimate, as we saw last week. And when it becomes ultimate, it becomes exclusive, judgmental, harsh, and legalistic. So those of us who grew up when this piety was strong in the community remember it as something of an affliction.

That seems strange nowadays, because no similar external piety has caught the imagination of the church. The old piety is a whipping boy, and so you'll hear the head of the church and any number of other theologians and teachers complaining about the pietists of the past. Well, they weren't that bad actually, though they certainly could be.

At any rate, nowadays there is no similar piety, and in the absence of it what we get is a whole lot of pieties, small p, fighting for dominance. My favorite I call pronoun piety. In seminary education virtually any circumlocution, any stretch of a sentence, is appropriate to avoid using the masculine pronoun, lest you be cursed. In fact I just heard of a student down at Southern Seminary who failed homiletics because he committed the unforgivable sin: he used a masculine form for God in a sermon. Let that be a lesson to you. This is pietism, pure and simple. And when it becomes pietism, whether the pietism of personal behavior, peace-and-justice pietism, or any other such thing, it becomes ruinous, like alcoholism.

So we had better take a good look at the texts for today. The gospel is really a continuation of the text for last week. I was fishing for that end, you know, fishing in the outhouse; that's where Jesus goes with this text, and this is really something. So we'll be working with the rest of Mark 7, but with some supporting texts that also have a lot to do with piety. We could call this Piety Sunday: various dimensions and aspects of piety, its various strengths and also its various weaknesses, its problems, the trap it sets. And Jesus himself, of course, is the arch-critic here. When he went after pietism, he went after it root and plant, the whole business. He is after our hearts, of course, and he doesn't like weeds.

Pious about the Commandments: Deuteronomy 4

First of all, the supporting texts. We have two from the Old Testament, beginning with a very interesting passage from Deuteronomy 4. It shouldn't be any surprise to us that when piety comes to the fore we get Deuteronomy, or that when we talk about piety we get Psalm 119. Deuteronomy is an extraordinarily pious book, and Psalm 119 an extraordinarily pious psalm.

Luther used to say, speaking of Deuteronomy 4 and similar passages, that you can't be pious and follow the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments will kick the piety right out of you, because they drag you beyond yourself into the life of your neighbor. As soon as you get dragged into service, as soon as the good Lord starts working on you through the law to make you some earthly good, you lose your piety. You have to mix it up. You have to hang around with sinners. You have to take care of the kids and change the diapers and look after your aging parents and do all the other things involved in obedience to the commandments. And of course you are not going to be pious very long. Then too, the law starts working on you, exposing the limitations of your obedience, the holes in it, and the falsity of it. Having run after your neighbor, you start running after the good Lord in hopes that he will pronounce a

word of forgiveness, because the commandments are just plain going to drive you to that point.

But as Luther said, though you can't be pious with the commandments, you can be pious about them. That's what we have in Deuteronomy 4: the old Adam, puffed up and bragging. "We've got the commandments, and you guys haven't got anything like them." That's pietism if you ever saw it in your whole life. We get all riled up about the commandments, not necessarily so eager about obedience to them, and then start reading judgment on the neighbor who doesn't have what we've got. So frankly, I wonder whether the people who chose this text weren't a little pious themselves, and seeking to advertise. I would never preach on it if I were you. It's one of those texts that is kind of fun to study, but boy, if you got into the pulpit with it, you'd be giving aid and comfort to the old Adam rather than slaying him. We don't want that.

Honest Piety: Psalm 119

Psalm 119:120–136 is quite a bit more interesting. This is legal piety, pure and simple. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." You've read all this before. And of course, in seminary faculty discussions, whenever Luther gets cranked up on the law, some Old Testament scholar is bound to come running and yelling, "But remember Psalm 119!" Well, forget Psalm 119. This is legal piety, pure and simple.

But one of the really attractive things about piety is that sometimes pietists are very honest. I know you can't believe it, but it's true. Years ago, when I was first teaching at the seminary, my favorite students were graduates of the Lutheran Bible Institute. This was in the old days, of course, when the LBI was really something. These people had been deep in the Scripture, and they'd had their illusions punctured. They had gotten disillusioned, and so they would tell the truth.

This psalm is like that. It tells the truth about itself, and so there's some wonderful stuff here. Legal piety works as long as you talk about the law. You don't want to listen to it too closely; you just want to talk about it. If you get close to the law, you can get caught in it, and when you get caught in it, you can really run into some trouble.

Listen to verse 127 and following, and you can see what's happening. The psalmist has been exposed by the law, and he is telling the truth. He is no longer the subject of his own preoccupations. He begins like this: "Truly I love your commandments more than gold, more

than fine gold.” There you go: he is singing his own praises, telling of his love. “Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your words gives light. ... With open mouth I pant, because I long for your commandments.” Boy, if that’s not pious, you never heard it in your whole life.

But now the psalmist starts to realize that the very law whose praises he has been singing is implicating him. So he confesses: “Keep my steps steady according to your promise.” The subject has changed, and changed deliciously. The psalmist is no longer the subject. It was “I love your law,” gushing over your law. But now it’s “You keep your promise,” and now we’re in business. As long as it’s us and our piety, the game is going to end. But when we are asking God to keep his promises, of course he says, “Well, I’ll be glad to do that. That’s what I’m good at.” This is God, the one who keeps his promises, compared with all the rest of us, who at best make an attempt. So you can have a lot of fun with Psalm 119, because every once in a while that honest spirit starts peeking out from behind the piety and telling the truth about itself, and when it does, it calls on God to fulfill what it cannot do itself.

Strong in the Lord: Ephesians 6

If the fun starts in Psalm 119, and you could preach on that a long time, it’s really fun in Ephesians 6. I hate to leave this wonderful book behind. These lessons have been just marvelous.

Listen to how the passage begins: “Be strong.” That’s a typical concern of pietism. Be strong in your faith. “He has a strong faith.” “I know his faith is strong.” You can hear that. But now listen: be strong where? “In the Lord.” There you go. Paul is directing us away from ourselves to the one who is the source of our life and being. Your strength is not in yourself. It is in the Lord. As long as you are standing alone, you are completely vulnerable. And by the time the apostle Paul introduces us, as he has before, to all the principalities and powers that contend against faith, you realize that we are just about as vulnerable as the maraschino cherry sitting on top of a hot fudge sundae. We are going to get eaten, and fast. But if our strength is in the Lord, then we can be strong.

When I was over in Finland at the Luther Congress, a scholar from Augustana was there doing some fabulous stuff, and he talked about the unity of Scripture. Philosophers ask “what,” he said, and the question “what” displays all the differences in Scripture. But if you ask “who,”

the unity of Scripture appears. Christ is the one who holds the book together. So be strong where? Not in what: attitudes, dispositions, piety, achievements. Be strong in the Lord.

And when you are strong in the Lord, you can begin to see all the powers arrayed against you. If we are all we've got, we have to trim this down and make sure the enemy doesn't look too large, because it's frightening. But in the Lord we are like a small girl or a small boy in the arms of a big brother. We can look at the enemy and say, "Go away."

So here we go. Since we are strong in the Lord, we are going to be attacked. That's how it works. Faith is a magnet for its opposite. It draws contradiction. It draws temptation, just the way a magnet draws the shavings from steel wool when you drag it across paper. And so the apostle Paul lists the sources of temptation we are going to face: "the cosmic powers of this present darkness," "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." We are not just contending with our own bad habits here. Our problem isn't sleeping with our hands under the covers; that's just ridiculous. The problem is that there are malevolent powers out there, and they are aimed precisely at faith in Christ Jesus. As long as we are strong in the Lord, we can do anything. But when we get dislodged, when that connection is broken, we are as vulnerable as we can possibly be.

"Therefore take up the whole armor of God." This is real piety. This is the healthy stuff. "Put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." Now we're cooking. We are exposed, serving a disputed sovereign, living under one whose universal claim is contested in the world. We live in hope, but in the confidence that even now, as we are attached to him, strength will surge and move and boil and bubble and carry and bless. We are moving in Christ Jesus. "Finally, be strong" where? Not in your own piety, but "in the Lord and in the strength of his power," and from there on it follows.

I get real tired of pastors who try to prove that there are other powers out there. We all know that. We contend with them day and night, even if we don't recognize the source of the temptation. So here you go: put on the whole armor, provide the whole armor, stick to the word, and you will provide help and blessing for people who are under such attack. He is the shield of faith. There you go; you can't beat that.

From the Heart: Mark 7

Now we are going to go from Ephesians 6 all the way to the outhouse, which is a very long way. I've been in Ephesus. You go to the library, and there is a brothel right across the street, and right beside the brothel a public restroom. There's no men's and no women's. There is just a whole series of holes set in the stone, so that you can sit together and share the local civic gossip.

When the Calvinists who translated our NRSV, and the old RSV as well, come to a passage like Mark 7:14–23, they immediately get a little embarrassed, and so we don't get a very colorful translation of this passage. I think that's really unfortunate. Luther used to say of Erasmus that he looked at the creation like a cow staring at a new gate, and we could say the same of the Calvinists: they can't even enjoy the restroom. So we have this passage sanitized. Jesus uses the term for privy, or outhouse. When you eat various things, they go right through you, through your gut, and in the natural course into the waste receptacle. Now, I have people in the other room, so I have to be careful myself. But you see what's happening: in this colorful way Jesus is registering the profoundest critique of legal piety you can make.

What happens? Piety focuses on food laws. That's one of its big targets. We know the preoccupation Israel had with its diet, which continues in kosher food. It's as though the eating of various foods promotes righteousness or promotes sin. So piety typically becomes preoccupied with the list. What can we eat? What's fair? What can I eat and get by with it? That's more like the question. How much can I eat without being punished? If I eat that, will I get in trouble? Legal questions are always like this. They are looking to establish minimums. Give me a list. I want to know what is pious to eat and what is not. We know the preoccupation with food laws in the Old Testament, and we know that among the Pharisees this whole thing started over hand washing, of course, and how much effort they made to maintain their food disciplines, to keep kosher.

So Jesus takes hold of this whole preoccupation and challenges it right at the root. In parentheses it is stated, "Thus he declared all foods clean." That's what he is doing: tipping over the apple cart. He is tipping over all this legal piety by saying that it's not what goes into a person that condemns them, but what comes out. What goes in goes into the belly and then, in the natural course of things, winds up as waste. That's a nice comparison for piety, and it's his suggestion. Piety becomes so self-preoccupied that the best it can do is turn into a pile. It goes through you and goes down and stinks, and it's gone, period. This morning, when I got

up to take my shower, I walked into the bathroom, and once again the dog had left a pile in front, and I stepped in it. Golly, that's about how it works. You just can't avoid it. You live in the world, and the dog provides the resources for comparison.

So Jesus says it's not what goes in that condemns. It just goes through; there's nothing left. It's what comes out. And now listen to this incredible list: "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." We'd better say "the human heart" for the sake of the pronoun pietists, although it's the man here who is the sinner, so that's probably not so bad. What an interesting list.

You've got it right on the money, Brian. Christ Jesus can list all these things because he is redeeming us from them. He knows our sins, and if we don't have one of them, well, just hang around a while; I'm sure I'll catch up. As the Redeemer of the world, redeeming us from our sins, he knows what they are, and so he knows what comes out of our hearts.

And this list is by no means complete. He himself could speak of hatred. He himself could speak of what Steve Paulson, in his wonderfully colorful way, calls our deicidal urges. There's another one: we want to put the Son of Man, the good Lord himself, to death. That's our ultimate goal. That's what comes out. It's not what goes in. You can eat just about anything without damage, unless it's poison. It's not what goes in that causes all the trouble. It's what's in there already: the old Adam, whose appetite is insatiable, who once satisfied simply looks for another hunger and keeps shopping *ad infinitum* and finally gets lost.

The Sins We Cannot See

So what is Jesus doing in this passage? He is warning us away from our self-preoccupations. And as he warns us away from our self-preoccupation, as he slays the old sinner in us, he is taking on those secret sins that catch us unawares.

Driving into town, I was thinking about a discussion I used to have with old Paul Hansen, who was pastor at Trinity in Moorhead, Minnesota, and worked in the national offices of the ALC down in Minneapolis. He died a few years ago. His brother was once asked whether Paul, living in Minneapolis, ever came to church at Saint Anthony Park in Saint Paul, and his brother said, "He doesn't, because there's no plane between Minneapolis and Saint Paul." He was quite an interesting man. He was always convinced that the old pietists, the old Haugian pietists, loved money, and he would give any number of illustrations. They were very careful

about their behavior in regard to alcohol and profanity. But another sin, avarice, was sneaking up on them, and sneaking up on them, it captured them, all to their great surprise. I had a very close friend, a self-described Haugian pietist right to the center of him, a missionary over in Tanzania, who loved money and never knew it. So he was always surprised when that love was exposed.

That's just how it works. We get preoccupied with what we can see, and then we get nailed by what we can't see. I've never met an alcoholic yet who wanted to be one. It was just one more, that's all. Just one more. And of course that one more was death. But nobody saw it. That's how it works. Pietism gets preoccupied with what is visible and measurable, and so it gets ambushed by what is hidden. Just look at the sins Jesus lists here. Some of them are obvious: fornication, theft, murder, adultery. But evil intentions come first, and then we have avarice, wickedness, deceit; maybe we can see some licentiousness; but envy, slander, pride, and folly are usually hidden. So we concentrate on what is manageable and achievable, and get ambushed by what's behind us.

So the alternative here is not an alternative at all. The promise here, as Christ Jesus cleanses us of this false piety, is that he is going to go on establishing us in true faith. Your strength is in him. To accept some disciplines, to say, "I'm going to read Scripture more. I'm going to pray before meals. I'm going to go to church. I'm going to receive the sacrament every Sunday. I'm going to fast before the sacrament": all of that is good stuff. It seems to me we would be better off if we just promoted these pieties as pieties. They are healthy; they are good. But piety is not faith. And so Christ Jesus wants to uproot us, to dislodge us, to shake us loose from the false pieties that destroy us, so that, anchored in true faith, we can grow and be strengthened. "All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." He comes from without, and coming from without, he makes the person righteous. He makes us righteous in him.

Well, how's that? I was too quick today, so maybe we can take some time for questions.

Questions and Answers

A comment on the slogan "Follow your heart."

Follow your heart, and what happens? You go right down the toilet. There's no redemption there.

A question about encouraging devotional disciplines without making them ultimate.

Encouraging these practices as pieties is a little like teaching your kids to clean their room or wash the dishes after supper or help out in the house. The temptation is to make it ultimate, to say cleanliness is next to godliness and go into all kinds of justification. In fact these are just simple habits. If I didn't discipline myself to read Scripture, I'd never read it. I know that shouldn't be true. I know my heart should have an incredible appetite for the word and should always be longing for it. But sometimes what I'm longing for is a cold beer. Sometimes what I'm longing for is my sweet baby's arms. Sometimes what I'm longing for is something other than what is really best for me. So I have to say to myself, "Read it, read it," and cultivate habits of reading it.

My wife and I have devotions every morning, and in retirement it has become one of the delicious points of the day for us. We use the Matins service from the old red hymnal, in which both of us were confirmed, and we read from *For All the Saints*, and that's it. We've been reading the stories of Samuel. It's like reading contemporary politics, lots of times: David and Absalom and all the rest. You gain from it, and it starts to reinforce itself.

So the most important thing in teaching piety is keeping it at the level of manners, at the level of discipline, and not letting it ascend beyond that. When it ascends beyond that, we're in big trouble. So we say to Christ Jesus, "Increase my faith," and when he hears a prayer like that, he is not going to turn you down. "Increase my faith." And then we turn to ourselves in these disciplines and see if we can't keep them for at least ten minutes. We used to say we should never make resolutions, because we just make liars of ourselves anyway. But there are some you can keep.

A comment about herring.

I always say that when Katie came out of the convent at Nimbschen, she was smuggled out in a herring barrel, and Luther mistook it for perfume. There's nothing better than herring. And of course, if you can add a little something to help dissolve the herring, that helps a lot.

Well, we're going to go over to the State Fair and witness Oregon's latest impieties, I suppose. We'll see you next week. God's peace to you, my friends. You are in my prayers through the week. All the best to you.

SOURCE

CROSS Talk, a weekly Gospel text study for preachers led by Dr. James A. Nestingen, St. Paul Lutheran Seminary. Recorded 28 August 2012 (about 40 minutes).

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrX7PciMKcc>

Edited from the recording for reading.