

Sermon for May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2026  
SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

READINGS

Numbers 21:4-9

**4** From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. **5** And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” **6** Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. **7** And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. **8** And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” **9** So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Psalm 107:1-9

[Collect verses in **bold**]

- 1** Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever!  
**2** Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,  
whom he has redeemed from trouble  
**3** and gathered in from the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.  
**4** Some wandered in desert wastes,  
finding no way to a city to dwell in;  
**5** hungry and thirsty,  
their soul fainted within them.  
**6** Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress.  
**7** He led them by a straight way  
till they reached a city to dwell in.  
**8 Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for his wondrous works to the children of man!**  
**9 For he satisfies the longing soul,  
and the hungry soul he fills with good things.**

James 1:26-27

**26** If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. **27** Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

John 16:23-30

**23** In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. **24** Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

**25** “I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer

speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. **26** In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; **27** for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. **28** I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.” **29** His disciples said, “Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! **30** Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God.”

Our meditation for this Sixth Sunday in Easter is on our Epistle reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Introduction

When St. James says the word “religious,” what he means is something along the line of “ceremonial observance.”<sup>12</sup> In the modern sense, we can think of it in terms of liturgy, hymnody, vestments, candles, Church calendars, and so forth. In St. James's day, “religion” was often bound up in the Mosaic Law, with the sacrifices and cleanliness codes and liturgical readings found in the synagogues. In the first century A.D., especially among Jews, religion as “ceremonial observance” was absolutely *everything*, the highest priority in life. “Religion” determined what people ate, what they wore, what sort of company they kept, where they lived, what they spent their money on, how they prayed, and every other outward aspect of their lives. But this is the very crux of it, that religion was an *outward* matter rather than an inward one.

## Christ's Religion

Our Epistle reading reflects a deep change in the sense of religion. Under the Mosaic system, for over a thousand years the people of God understood religion to be the ceremonial observance of things that made them unique among the rest of humanity. They were to dress different, eat different, speak different and celebrate different days. Unlike the pagans that surrounded ancient Israel, the holy nation was supposed to be so unique in their lifestyle – and prosperous, since they were blessed when they were obedient – that their very existence bore witness to the true God. Unfortunately, human sinfulness got in the way and frustrated this plan. Simply put, the Law was impossible to keep and did nothing to regenerate people; the answer given to Israel for any sin they committed was animal sacrifice at the altar in the Temple, and every time there was a new sin...a new sacrifice was needed.

Eventually something had to give. Not only was the Old Covenant unsustainable by itself, Israel and Judah had gone into Exile at various times, dispersing their population across different empires. By the first century A.D., there were Jews living as far West as Spain to as far East as Persia. While the average Jew in that day might be able to restrict his diet and wear special clothing, the sheer distance to the Temple meant living in sin and guilt most days out of the year. Not only did the Law not save, but by this time God had shown it to be wholly inadequate even for daily life.

So something had to change. That change was planned from the beginning, and it is enacted by Jesus, who removed the sin problem by giving up His life for us on the Cross, thus instituting the New Covenant. Because all of our sins are forgiven, we are free from the shackles of sacrifices. Because we are justified by faith, we do not have to earn Heaven by some silly hamster-wheel of works.<sup>3</sup> Yet here, even under the New Covenant the emphasis is *still* placed on being a unique people. Jesus is the same

1 The word translated as “religion” is θρησκεία. Transliterated “threskeia,” Strong's #2356

2 <https://biblehub.com/greek/2356.htm>

3 Of course, Hebrews 11 teaches us that no one was *ever* saved by their works, but many people were convinced that this was the case by their misreading of the Law.

God who gave Israel the Old Covenant,<sup>4</sup> and He is very much still interested in getting the message out for nonbelievers to learn about the true God and convert. He *still wants* us to be religious. But now that the Old Covenant is fulfilled, there is no need to do this with different foods or clothing or hairstyles. Instead, Christ invites us to distinguish ourselves by being charitable and avoiding sin.

This becomes the “pure and undefiled” religion, – again, doing acts of charity and avoiding sin. These two dynamics have replaced the old Mosaic holiness code for us. Instead of offering up the firstfruits of our crops or presenting ourselves in Jerusalem for the Passover, Christians give alms to the poor and do favors for those in need. Instead of avoiding unclean foods and objects, Christians flee unclean *acts*, like fornication or gossip. It is sin and sinful beliefs (the temptation to which St. James says comes from the world) which stain someone, not shellfish or touching an open sore. It is charity which pleases God far more than any special clothing or unshaven beard. And it is both of these which mark the Christian as *different* from the rest of the world. Nonbelievers are supposed to see that we don't look very different from them, but we certainly *act* different, and this makes inroads to preaching the Gospel.

## Conclusion

What St. James has written here is as radical as the change from Old Covenant to the New, and it applies just as much now as it did when he wrote it. Suddenly, outward ceremonial observances mean very little in our religious life. Religion is no longer about keeping a laundry list of incidental minutiae concerned with our external presentation. It must all spring from the heart now, the inner man who is truly devoted to Christ who saved him; if a man believes that he is saved because his ceremonies or good works merit him Heaven, then his heart is deceived and his religion is worthless.

This applied in the first century when St. James wrote his Epistle. But if we are being honest, it applies far *more* today. St. James had to contend with the judaizers in his day, false teachers who wanted to turn Jesus into a mere footnote of history as they preached salvation by the works of the Mosaic Law. Today, believers must contend against similar groups of judaizers, but in addition to them we have the “high-church movement” which puts more emphasis on liturgy than the Gospel itself! There are organizations devoted to having the prettiest cathedrals, the nicest gold-woven vestments, conducting the Mass in dead languages, and claiming that if we do not observe their particular liturgy then we shall end up in hell. Ironically, despite all the earthly beauty of their vestments and chanting, so little of this is done with anything approaching faith in Christ from their hearts that their religion has become worthless to Him.

My friends, let us not take that route. We have been brought into the New Covenant by the shed blood of Christ, and we must take heart that our Lord has saved us. So then, let us not worship God with worthless religion, but do what is valuable, pure, and undefiled to Him. Let us be kind and generous, helping those in need while avoiding the temptation to sin.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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4 Jude vs.5: “Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.”