

Caveat Emptor

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, August 30, 2009)

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 (TEV) ¹Then Moses said to the people, “Obey all the laws that I am teaching you, and you will live and occupy the land which the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. ²Do not add anything to what I command you, and do not take anything away. Obey the commands of the LORD your God that I have given you. ⁶Obey them faithfully, and this will show the people of other nations how wise you are. When they hear of all these laws, they will say, ‘What wisdom and understanding this great nation has!’ ⁷“No other nation, no matter how great, has a god who is so near when they need him as the LORD our God is to us. He answers us whenever we call for help. ⁸No other nation, no matter how great, has laws so just as those that I have taught you today. ⁹Be on your guard! Make certain that you do not forget, as long as you live, what you have seen with your own eyes. Tell your children and your grandchildren

James 1:17-27 (TEV) ¹⁷Every good gift and every perfect present comes from heaven; it comes down from God, the Creator of the heavenly lights, who does not change or cause darkness by turning. ¹⁸By his own will he brought us into being through the word of truth, so that we should have first place among all his creatures.

¹⁹Remember this, my dear friends! Everyone must be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to become angry. ²⁰Human anger does not achieve God’s righteous purpose. ²¹So get rid of every filthy habit and all wicked conduct. Submit to God and accept the word that he plants in your hearts, which is able to save you.

²²Do not deceive yourselves by just listening to his word; instead, put it into practice. ²³If you listen to the word, but do not put it into practice you are like people who look in a mirror and see themselves as they are. ²⁴They take a good look at themselves and then go away and at once forget what they look like. ²⁵But if you look closely into the perfect law that sets people free, and keep on paying attention to it and do not simply listen and then forget it, but put it into practice—you will be blessed by God in what you do.

²⁶Do any of you think you are religious? If you do not control your tongue, your religion is worthless and you deceive yourself. ²⁷What God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15 (TEV) ¹Some Pharisees and teachers of the Law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. ²They noticed that some of his disciples were eating their food with hands that were ritually unclean—that is, they had not washed them in the way the Pharisees said people should.

(³For the Pharisees, as well as the rest of the Jews, follow the teaching they received from their ancestors: they do not eat unless they wash their hands in the proper way; ⁴nor do they eat anything that comes from the market unless they wash it first. And they follow many other rules which they have received, such as the proper way to wash cups, pots, copper bowls, and beds.)

⁵So the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law asked Jesus, “Why is it that your disciples do not follow the teaching handed down by our ancestors, but instead eat with ritually unclean hands?”

⁶Jesus answered them, “How right Isaiah was when he prophesied about you! You are hypocrites, just as he wrote: ‘These people, says God, honor me with their words, but their heart is really far away from me. It is no use for them to worship me, because they teach human rules as though they were my laws!’ ⁸ “You put aside God’s command and obey human teachings.”

¹⁴Then Jesus called the crowd to him once more and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand. ¹⁵There is nothing that goes into you from the outside which can make you ritually unclean. Rather, it is what comes out of you that makes you unclean.”

Caveat Emptor – what does that mean? If you don’t know Latin and break down “Caveat Emptor” you might say “cave at emptor” or empty cave. Well, more on that later. The book of Deuteronomy is, for the most part, the conclusion of the story of Moses. The first chapters tell about some of the final years in the wilderness, and their conquests of some of the smaller nations. The main section of Deuteronomy is the collection of the laws that Moses received from God, and handed on to the people of Israel. For example, chapter 5 includes the Ten Commandments, and chapter 6 gives us the greatest commandment, the one that Jesus quoted to the lawyer, saying: **You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.** And the last chapter tells of the death of Moses, concluding with a glowing eulogy.

Our lesson for today summarizes what Moses taught regarding God’s laws. These were not just rules for everyday living, there was something greater here than rules for living. The heart of the laws that Moses gave were

not the Ten Commandments, in spite of the fuss we have today in some parts of the country. The heart of the law of God is love. Love God, love one another, as Jesus taught. That is so basic, so straight-forward, so foundational to our whole faith, we should be able to handle it. But we can't, it seems that things have become so complicated that we need help. The world has changed, things move faster, there is more pressure than there was in the time of Moses. How do you show God's love to the guy who cuts you off and almost runs you off the road? How do you show God's love to the person who sees your every mistake & criticizes your every move? How do you show your obedience to God's laws when you get a job that requires you to move to another town or another country, and you can't even visit your father and mother, let alone honor them, or when you are required to work on Sunday, and can't even join other Christians for morning worship?

But are we really that much different? I can just imagine a young person, about 3,000 years ago, sitting in front of grandpa, listening to grandpa tell stories about how it was back in those days, wandering through the wilderness with Moses, seeing God, as smoke, fire. And I can imagine grandpa trying to be faithful, and remembering how Moses taught that he should teach God's laws to his children, and to his children's children, and then the grandson saying, "Well, that is OK grandpa, but that was back in the old days. "Times have changed. Things are different now that we are no longer in the wilderness. We need to figure out how to apply these laws now." Does that sound familiar? Do you think it might have happened that way back then, just as it happens today? Anyway, a whole school of wise men, generation after generation, applied themselves to the task of interpreting God's laws for the present day so that people could know what God required. By the time of Jesus, there were books and books of interpretation. The people who were best at this were the Pharisees. They were not hypocrites – not on purpose anyway. And so they made rules and developed traditions. You can only walk so far on the Sabbath. You can only lift something if it weighs less than 3 pounds. You can, and should, read Scripture. Oh, and don't forget to tithe, tithe your income, your grain, your wine, your flocks, even your bread dough. And the Pharisees followed every one of these laws, or if they broke a law, they brought a special offering or sacrifice. But the problem was, they became critical of those who didn't follow the laws so closely, such as Jesus and his disciples. In our Gospel lesson, that wasn't a question they asked Jesus, it was a criticism in the form of a question sort of like asking, "why do you always do things backwards?" The question was, why do you eat with defiled hands, or in other words, why are you tolerant of sin? Is this starting to sound a little more familiar?

James uses the image that the word of God is planted within us. And when God's word is planted, it will bear fruit. The fruit is not just words, either. Words need to match deeds and attitudes. I have often met persons, and so have you, who are quick to proclaim their faith & their devotion to God but who are quick to criticize me because they don't like the way I worship, or the way I dress, or even where I worship. Isn't that like the attitude reflected in the question the Pharisees posed to Jesus? Such people of today might say, "We are doing the right things in our faith. We wash our hands carefully, according to the ritual established by our traditions. We don't dance, we don't smoke, we don't drink, we don't work on Sundays. We are wonderful, pious Christians."

Caveat Emptor – let the buyer beware. There is something inside that is rotten, only the outside is polished. This is what Jesus meant with his response to the Pharisees. Outwardly, you are doing all the right and good things, but inside, that's where the uncleanness is. In other words, don't judge a book by its cover. Beware of wolves in sheep's clothing. Don't judge the contents by the package. Let the buyer beware – Caveat Emptor! Now just in case you think this is some kind of new phenomenon, that in the good old days, sellers were honest and you could trust everyone, the expression, "Let the buyer beware" is from the old Latin phrase, from the time of the Romans, "Caveat Emptor." Let the buyer, let the listener, beware. What is on the outside may not be what is on the inside. Or in our faith we might say, "Watch for the fruits." James urges us to be "doers of the word and not hearers only." As doers, we bear fruit for the Master.

In a beautiful closing hymn for worship services, John Fawcett has the words, "May the fruits of thy salvation in our hearts and lives abound." John Fawcett, an Englishman, wrote these words in 1773. Fawcett lived from 1740 to 1817. He was converted under the preaching of George Whitfield. He joined the Methodist movement and later became a Baptist preacher and served several churches. In one parish, he turned a part of his home into a school for neighborhood children. More than a hundred hymns came from his pen, the most famous being his "Blest Be the Tie That Binds." As we sing our closing hymn today, the "other hymn" attributed to John Fawcett, let us consider how the fruits of God's salvation abound in our lives. Are these fruits evident in our actions as well as our words? Caveat Emptor – let the buyer beware. All that glitters is not gold. Don't judge a book by its cover. And don't you let yourself become an empty cave, following empty rituals, but let God's salvation bear fruit in your life. Amen.