

## 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-23; James 1:17-27**

**Song of Solomon 2:8-13** is a love song spoken by the woman, as she awaits the visit of her lover. Both this passage and the entire book are a rhapsody of love, the exquisite expression of sexual love and its longings that can no longer be stifled. Reading it reminds the reader of what it is like to be deeply in love.

The Song of Solomon has been interpreted in the past (especially in Roman and medieval times) as a description of Christ's love for the church – perhaps because it was too hard for celibates to cope with the clear and overt sexuality of the work. But it is a reminder to us of the power, single-mindedness and all-consuming reality of sexual love, one that helps us to understand the sheer relationality of love – whether it be physical between two lovers, or whether it be between God and his people.

Perhaps the most insightful understanding of the Song of Solomon is given by R.C. Sproul in his commentary on that book. It is lengthy, but it is worth reading in its entirety and then reflecting upon.

“Many interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, have regarded the Song as an allegory of God's love for Israel or the Church. The association of the book with Solomon, however, points us in the direction of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Wisdom literature is distinguished, among other things, by its focus on the common sphere of human relationships. The Book of Proverbs uses language similar to that of the Song of Solomon in talking about marital love (Prov. 5:15-19), the subject of the Song. This love must finally be seen in the context of the even greater love of God that the Bible as a whole reveals. The beauty and worth of sexual love is affirmed at the beginning of the Bible, where the difference and relationship of the sexes is associated with the creation of humanity in God's image (Gen. 1:27; cf. 2:19-25). If sexual love were evil in itself, it would be inappropriate as an allegory of Christ's love for His church.

“The Song of Solomon reveals three qualities of love between a man and a woman: self-giving, desire, and commitment. In all these ways love reflects the greater love of God our Creator. God delights in us and gives Himself to us. God desires us wholly for Himself. God feels deeply both the pain and pleasure of His relationship with us. Although it is not proper to attribute sexuality to God, there is an analogy between the love we experience in marriage and the love that God has for us. The Old Testament prophets compare the love of God for His people to the love of a bridegroom for the bride (e.g., Jer. 2:2; Hos. 2:14-20). Christian marriage, according to Paul, should be modeled on the most perfect expression of such love, the self-giving love of Christ for His church and its willing response (Eph. 5:22, 33). The climax of the Song of Solomon is the praise of vehement and faithful love (8:6-7).

“The Song of Solomon shows us love outside Eden, not free from sorrow, but still beautiful and a reflection of God's own love for us. It looks back to the gift of love in creation, and forward to the perfection of love in one greater than Solomon, the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), p. 935.

Song of Solomon 2:8-13 is the remembrance by the woman of a most special encounter she had with her lover. She begins by telling us that the man comes speedily to the woman's house, with all the speed and determination of a gazelle or a stag in heat (vv. 8-9a). He arrives at her home and peers through the latticework of the windows, searching for her (vs. 9b). Then the man spies her and speaks to her. He reminds her that it is springtime, when the whole earth is awakening from its winter slumber, and has become fecund and receptive and open again (vv. 10-13a). So he invites the woman to come out from her house and to join him in lovemaking. "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away" (v. 13b).

Although the lectionary does not finish the poem (it continues through vs. 17), the remainder tells us that the lover has his doubts that she will come away with him for love-making, for she is like "the clefts of the rock, the covert of the cliff" (vs. 14), impregnable to his suit.

But she tells him that "the little foxes" (that is, her former suitors) "ruin the vineyard" (that is, have tempted her in the past). So now, she is not only tempted but more than willing to go with him for a time of joyous love-making. So "until the day breathes and the shadows flee" (that is, all night long), "turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle or a young stag on the cleft mountains" (that is, be like a stag in heat and come, take my body and breasts) (vs. 17)! Nothing shy about her!

**Psalm 45:1-9** is an unusual psalm because it describes the sexual desire and tension of the approaching wedding of the king and his virgin princess, and their mutual longing for its soon consummation. Thus, it bears much more resemblance to the writing of the Song of Solomon than it does to the psalms!

The psalm begins with a brief introduction in which the author prays for inspiration. "My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe" (vs. 1). A "goodly theme" can be better translated "a good word" or "a sweet melody". It is as if the psalmist is so overwhelmed with the joy of his master and soon-to-be mistress that it is as if his heart has composed this delightful song all on its own; the melody and words have simply come gushing out! So here is this flood of praise.

The first part of the psalm is a eulogy of the king (vss. 2-9), the second of the king's new bride (vss. 10-16), and then, finally, the concluding promise to the king and his nation as the result of this eventful marriage (vs. 16-17). The king is eulogized in the first part in three ways: his physical beauty (vs. 2), his wise, compassionate and strong rule (vss. 3-5), and his capacity to sexually continue and even to strengthen the Davidic dynasty (vss. 6-7).

In this section of praise for the king, there are three particularly striking statements. The first is in verse 4. The standard translation of the passage reads "In your majesty ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right". But that is a weak translation. A much better translation of the Hebrew would be "Ride triumphantly in the cause of truth, and defend the poor".

The second is in verse 7. The standard translation is “you love righteousness and hate wickedness”. But the much-more gutsy translation of the Hebrew that captures the passage’s emotion would better be, “You must love justice and hate iniquity”. In other words, in both verses 4 and 7, the psalmist is declaring as the responsibility of the king – even as he is approaching his own wedding bed – to be that of working for justice, especially in regards to the poor. The truly effective king to Israel was a king who neither secured the nation against its national enemies nor built the wealth of the nation. Rather, he was one who was committed to justice for all but was particularly concerned for the plight of the widow, the orphan, the impoverished and the “stranger who is within your gates”. Even when approaching the matter of the marriage of the king and the securing of his dynasty, the true success of an Israelite king was determined by his commitment to the plight of the nation’s poor!

The third striking statement is found in verse 6. “Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever; your royal scepter is a scepter of equity”. When one reads this verse, it seems as if the psalmist has suddenly shifted focus from the king to Yahweh. But that is not the case. The Hebrew would be better read, not “O God” but “O divine one”! That is, it is a reference to a human being – the king – who is almost divine-like in his faithful following of the mission to which he has been called as king: working for the equitable distribution of wealth and the equitable practice of justice.

This passage is unlike any other in the Bible, for it comes the closest to associating divinity with human rule. This was a concept most other cultures of the time embraced with fervor, from the Egyptians who, a thousand years before this psalm was written, saw their Pharaoh as being an incarnation of their supreme god to the Romans two thousand years later who worshipped the divine “genius” of their emperor. But to the Hebrew people, only Yahweh was God, for no one shared divinity with him. And yet, there is this peculiar passage, perhaps written by a psalmist who got a little carried away with joy over his king’s coming marriage. It is intriguing, however, how the author of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews uses this passage to suggest that the Messiah is God’s “anointed” or “divine one” (Heb. 1:8-9)!

But the psalm then shifts from focus on the king to attention being paid to his bride (45:10-16). She enters the marriage hall, and there is as if a gasp goes up from the crowd at her profound beauty. “The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes; in many-colored robes she is led to the king; behind her the virgins, her companions, follow” (vss. 13b-14). Earlier, the soon-to-be princess has taken leave of her family; “forget your people and your father’s house, and the king will desire your beauty” (vs. 10-11a). She processes “from ivory palaces” accompanied by “stringed instruments (that) make (her) glad”, she who is clothed “in gold of Ophir” (vss. 8-9). In referring to the about-to-become-queen, the author wants to make two impressions upon the reader: first, her striking beauty which is a sign of her great fecundity; second, the wealth of a king who can adorn her so that she becomes adorable, not just to the king, but to all the men of the realm who stand in open-mouthed awe as she passes before them!

The psalm then reaches its conclusion. “In the place of ancestors you, O king, shall have sons; you will make them princes in all the earth. I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations; therefore, the people will praise you forever and ever” (vss. 16-17). The reward for being a faithful king, working for justice and fulfilling his responsibility toward the people, is

that the king will “win fair maiden” who will produce for him a dynasty, so that his nation will know justice and equity for all its people – from the poorest to the highest – and they will practice “shalom” together! That is the fate of the truly faithful king, queen and people! And for that reality, the people will be forever grateful.

**Mark 7:1-23** is the first direct confrontation by Jesus of Israel’s elite (in this case, the Pharisees) since his strong man parable in 3:22. The Pharisees criticize Jesus’ followers for not following the purity code (in this case, not washing their hands before eating and thus eating their food with defiled hands). That attack on their part opens them to a virulent attack from Jesus on exclusive table fellowship (7:6-8) and oral tradition (7:9-23). In this attack, Jesus has three audiences: first, the Pharisees themselves ((vv. 1-13); second, the crowds (vv. 14-16), and third, the disciples (vv. 17-23).

Jesus’ initial diatribe against the Pharisees (breaking the Law through breaking the purity code) requires some explanation on Mark’s part. He tells the reader, “The Pharisees and the Jews (i.e., the Jewish elite) do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders, and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles” (7:3-4).

The actual law which the Pharisees accuse Jesus’ disciples of breaking is Leviticus 15:11, which reads, “All those whom the one with the discharge touches without his having rinsed his hands in water shall wash their clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening”. The discharge to which Leviticus refers is a discharge from the genitals (Lev. 15:2), whether it be semen from a man or menstrual flow from a woman. Thus, the Levitical stipulation was clearly created to reduce the spreading of infection or contamination. But the Pharisees and priests had taken that stipulation and created an entire religious law-code around it. This was called “the traditions of the elders”.

The “tradition of the elders” was the oral interpretation and application of the Law that supposedly originated with Moses, but was passed down orally from father to son, gradually becoming more and more complex as nuances of that law were added to it. Thus, a Levitical law designed to protect Israelites from passing along disease had been so elaborated that it now had to do with washing before each meal (what would you do if water were not present?) and even dealing with the ritualistic “washing of cups, pots and bronze kettles”. All these accretions had now become as much of the Law as the Law itself!

Jesus attacks the Pharisees in their criticizing of his followers by quoting to them Isaiah 29:13, “This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines”. What is particularly significant about that quote is that the Pharisees, knowing scripture as well as they do, would know that this argument by Isaiah summarizes his attack against the religious and political leaders of Israel for being blind to God’s clear intentions that they do justice (Isa. 29:9) because they do not read the word of God (or the Law) as God intended it to be understood (29:11ff).

Jesus follows up this attack against the Pharisees with another attack. He criticizes them for their practice of *corban* (Mark 7:11-13). *Corban* could be declared by a worshipper or by the priest over a special offering a person would make to God (Lev. 1:2). Once the sacrifice was declared to be *corban*, it could not be used for any other purpose than that to which it had been dedicated. Again, the “traditions of the elders” added to *corban* far more than what the author of Leviticus intended. In Leviticus, it simply meant that you couldn’t sell the meat sacrificed to God or otherwise seek to use it except to eat it “before the Lord”. But under the oral law, it had come to mean that a rich person could give property or real property to the Temple as a way of guaranteeing that it could not be claimed by poor parents, children or the community for their benefit. The person declaring something *corban* could have use of it for the remainder of his or her life, but it would revert to the Temple upon that person’s death.

Thus, *corban* had become a means to avoid responsibility toward one’s family, community, town or even nation. For example, the Law required obedience of the Jubilee law that property should be returned every fifty years from its present owner to the person whose family inheritance it was (Lev. 25:23-28). In this way, wealth would be redistributed every 50 years, so that no Jewish family would ever be permanently deprived of their land – no matter what economic misfortunes they faced in the previous 49 years. But *corban* had become a legal maneuver designed to enable the wealthy to disobey the economic imperatives of Jubilee by obeying religious regulations pressed upon the people designed to circumvent that law.

The purpose of Jesus’ criticism of the elite of Israel in these two accounts is clear. He recognizes that the intent of those holding unilateral power (whether it be political, economic or religious power) is to build up the institution in which that person is seated by increasing people’s obedience, commitment, service and financial support of that institution. A truly effective way of accomplishing that is to cloak that institution’s intent in generally accepted visionary and missional convictions of the people. That was what the practice of *corban* was all about. And that was what the accretion of laws around cleanliness was all about.

The ostensible reason both for practicing *corban* and for ritual purity was that of enabling Israel to become increasingly obedient to the Law of Moses – and thus, more clearly within God’s will and purpose for the people. But the practical outcome of the practice of *corban* was to both allow the wealthy to avoid their economic responsibilities toward their community and to increase the wealth of the Temple. And the practical outcome of the practice of ritual cleansing was to increase constraints upon the people so that they would be more obedient to the Temple and more dependent upon the religious/political/economic leaders to provide direction. The real purpose of such practices as *corban* and ritual purity was to increase the wealth, power and prestige of those who managed Israel’s Laws – the priests, Sadducees and Pharisees. The bottom line was that the people would be more enslaved to Israel’s leaders and less able to access the political and economic justice stipulations of the Law.

A modern analogy might help us to understand this tendency on the part of those who are in power to use that power to build an institution at the expense of its mission. There is a great deal of emphasis in Protestantism today on evangelism. The mission of evangelism is to bring people into a dynamic relationship with Christ, and thus, growing the Body of Christ. But when evangelism is advocated by those in leadership positions in denominations and churches, it often

has less to do with a dynamic relationship with Christ and more to do with the convert joining that church. That is, what the ecclesiastical system is really after is not “evangelism” but rather “new member recruitment”, both to strengthen presently-existing churches and to plant new churches. An authentic test of whether a denominational official or pastor truly wants to do the work of *evangelism* rather than *new member recruitment* would be whether they would rejoice at someone coming to Christ under their auspices who would then choose to join another church or denomination than theirs!

Often, those in the church hierarchy advocate evangelism, not because they want to see people come to Christ, but because they want to build the constituency of the institution and, consequently, increase its financial base. Like the Pharisees, they are using “the visionary and missional convictions of the people” in order to accomplish institution-building ends which, if successful, strengthens their position in that institution.

Thus, Jesus concludes his diatribe, first by speaking to the crowd (vv. 14-16) and then to his disciples (vv. 17-23), “There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (vs. 15). And then Jesus defines his point further. “It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (vss. 21-23). It is the intent of the heart that God sees, in determining the intent of that person – not whether he observes ritual purity or declares an offering as *corban*. Thus, God sees the intent of all – whether they are a Pharisee, a wealthy person seeking to avoid community responsibility, a priest, an ordinary person – or even a denominational executive or pastor!

**James 1:17-27** begins a five-Sunday study of the book of James. James is concerned with practical Christianity, with “walking the walk” rather than only “talking the talk”. He is primarily concerned that Christian piety be lived out, not simply in worship and spiritual formation but in actions of self-control (1:19-26; 3:13-18; 4:1-5), patient endurance of trials (1:2-4, 12; 5:7-11) and acting justly toward the most disadvantaged people in society (1:27; 2:8-19). Consequently, he is concerned that Christians not be seduced by the power and wealth of the rich or politically influential (2:1-13) and find themselves, because of building such allegiances, acting callously toward the poor or powerless (5:1-6). Thus, the book of James is an essential handbook on how the church can practice the Christian faith through their participation in and actions within pagan society.

The vehicle James used to fashion and sustain his argument was the Greek *diatribe*. Today, the word *diatribe* has come to mean an abusive and sometimes bitter or satirical speech; it has the sense of beating down or overwhelming one’s opponent with a volley of words. But that was not the Graeco-Roman *diatribe*. Rather it was a prolonged discourse that presents a series of rapid-fire questions and answers to an imaginary opponent that, by the very nature of the answers, sets the frame of the argument (e.g., 2:1-22). A diatribe is often built around the use of metaphors from nature (1:6, 10-11; 2:26; 3:5-6, 11-12; 4:4; 5:2-3, 18), human activities (1:23, 3:3-4, 7; 5:7) and using figures from the past as examples (2:21, 25; 5:1, 11, 17-18). Knowing that James is intentionally using the Graeco-Roman *diatribe* helps us to understand the intent of his epistle: it

is to convince the church not to allow itself to fall into cultish activities (esoteric worship practices not understandable to non-Christians, introspective and privatized religious practices) but rather to be engaging the pagan world by working for justice and morality in that world. To James, the church exists to be engaged in public life! So to present his case to Christians, he uses a form of argument that is a part of the very public life in which he is urging Christians to be engaged, a form of argument well known to all living in the Roman Empire – the *diatribe*.

James begins his *diatribe* by stating, “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (1:17). He begins his arguments, not with the church or Christians themselves, but with God. Any capacity in Christians (or in other human beings, for that matter) to do the good or ethical thing or to act justly doesn’t come from us and our own “good nature”. It comes from God, and God’s work within us. It all begins in God, who works in and through us as the “first fruits of his creation” (vs. 18). Thus, acting justly or charitably is not due to our natural good nature; it is due to God working in our lives, transforming us into God’s kind of people who cannot help but live out Godly lives in our commitments to justice and equity.

James then goes on to point out that the Church has a tendency to place its emphasis on the gift of eloquent speech; we reward our great preachers and teachers because of their capacity to articulate the faith. But that is not God’s priority at all. God’s emphasis is one of active listening that leads to active response. It is the one who listens intently to the Word of God coming through the Bible, the church, the world and the people with whom we interact each day (pagans as well as Christians) who is the one who is truly godly. God has given us one mouth and two ears, indicating to us that we should spend twice the time listening to one another and allowing what we learn to inform our actions than we should spend proclaiming the gospel (1:19-21)!

The primary mission to which Christians are called is self-evident. “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. (If Christians act out what they learn from listening, then) they will be blessed in their doing” (1:22-25). The indication that one’s salvation is authentic is one’s action, not one’s speech. Anybody can talk about Jesus (even politicians)! But being “doers of the word” and not merely hearers or speakers is the true authentication that our faith is real.

And what is that “doing” that genuinely authenticates our faith? “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:27). The marks of authentic faith are avoidance of self-deception (that is, honesty with yourself) (1:26), piety (1:26), concern for the poor (1:27) and not being seduced by the false values of the larger society (1:27).

A particularly important phrase is used by James: “care for orphans and widows in their distress”. The Hebrew Bible reflects particular concern for the care of “widows and orphans”. They should be the particular focus of the Church’s concern because God is so concerned with them (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 9:18; 68:5; 146:9), and Israel was also commanded to be equally concerned as was God (Deut. 14:9; Ezek. 22:7). But we have to understand what the biblical writers meant by “widows and orphans”.

In the ancient Near East from the time of Moses to the time of Jesus, Paul and James, the most vulnerable people in society were “widows and orphans”. If a man’s wife died and left that man with children, he had the challenge of raising those children but he also still had at his disposal his position, the protections of the Law and the option to marry again. But if a husband died, the woman had nothing. She lost his estate, she had no “protector” before the Law or before the ravages of her relatives; the only thing she owned were the clothes on her back. She didn’t even have the option of marriage, because the decision to marry was made on the part of the man, not the woman. A widow was totally helpless – not just powerless, but helpless!

Likewise, an orphan was in the same situation. He or she had lost all the legal and economic protection of a father, now deceased. But that orphan also lost the compassion, the sagacity and the survival skills of even one’s mother. Thus, an orphan was totally helpless in society, and only the compassionate willingness of a relative or neighbor to take that child into one’s own household could save that orphan from starvation, slavery or destitution.

In other words, “widows and orphans” was the Hebrew way of talking about anyone who was among the most vulnerable, marginalized, exploited and oppressed of that society. Both that society’s political, economic and religious systems and the people themselves were arrayed against them, to exploit them and to take advantage of them. And they had no protector or defender before those rapacious systems and people. But in Israel, they had one force in their favor. They had the Law of Moses that commanded that the nation, its systems and its people be compassionate and work for justice for the “widows and orphans”. So the term didn’t just mean women whose husbands had died or children whose parents had died. It meant anyone who was vulnerable to exploitation, oppression and marginalization in Israel.

Thus, when James said that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress”, what he was actually saying was that the church was to be engaged in pagan society *on the side of the poor, the powerless and the marginalized!* True Christianity was not talk about how much we love Jesus; it was action that advocated the cause of the disenfranchised of one’s society – whoever that might be.

But there is more. James also wrote that “religion that is pure and undefiled is to keep oneself unstained by the world”. What he was essentially saying was that, as Christians and the Church work for justice for the poor and powerless of the world, they are also to be *in* the world but not *of* the world! That is, they are not to allow themselves to be corrupted by the priorities and values of the pagan society in which they lived. That society might declare that one’s worth is measured by the wealth they accumulate, but Christians shouldn’t listen to that lie. That society might believe that power and prestige and position and status are the “chief end of man”, but Christians shouldn’t succumb to such measurements. Instead, Christians who are in a society and working for its transformation will also stand over against that society in calling it to change its values to kingdom values and become what God created it to be. The Church and its Christians should not be seduced by the priorities trumpeted by that society’s political, economic and religious systems, but should hold up an alternate culture to that society and live out that alternate culture in the midst of “wolves”.



Thus, in the final analysis, true religion is defined by James as being demonstrated by Christians' work for social justice in the society in which they live (especially for that society's poor) and by working for the transformation of that society into the world that God intends – a shalom community of justice, equitable sharing of wealth so that poverty is eliminated, and a people who are “at one” with God and each other. Authentic Christianity is one that “walks the walk”, not just “talks the talk”!

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