

is good and healthy is when people worship God with sincerity, in their hearts and in the way they live, not just with their prayers and external religious rituals. Prayer and worship are worthless if they are disconnected from the rest of life. What the Pharisees were upholding wasn't living tradition but dead traditionalism: doing things for the sake of doing them, because they've always been done that way; making laws more important than people; judging people by the externals; reducing religion to rule-keeping – worshipping God in the right way, saying the right prayers, mixing with the right people, eating the right food. These, as Jesus indicated, don't of themselves make you a good person, a holy person. True religion is about how you show your love and respect for God through your love and concern for your neighbour. That is the healthy balance – authentic tradition. Or, as St James put it: "Pure unspoilt religion... is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows... and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world."

Application

What is it that contaminates us, makes us unclean, not truly religious? Jesus mentions a whole list of what he calls "evil intentions": "fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly". These are all sins against our neighbour, ways of manipulating, using, deceiving or harming others. Simply keeping religious rules like worshipping in the right church, observing holy days and fasts, will not give us life or make us pure in God's eyes. What puts us into a healthy, life-giving relationship with God is when we treat our fellow men and women with kindness, consideration, respect, compassion and love. It is when we marry our inner convictions, the values we cherish, with our actions.

The heart of true religion is never mere external observance, and never simply other-worldly. Life-giving religion is grounded in daily reality and looks outwards to our neighbour. That is the tradition which gives life and leads to the promised land of God's kingdom.