Our Scriptures from Deuteronomy, James, and Mark’s Gospel seem, at first blush, to be in conflict with one another. In his last sermon, Moses admonishes the people to obey God’s law. He is so controlling, that he warns the children of Israel not to *add* or *subtract* anything from God’s commandments. Then fast-forward 1,200 years, as Mark records a story from our Lord’s life where he seems to poke holes in the Law, questioning the kosher rules of that day. James writes a letter to new Christians some 25 years after our Lord’s life and says, “Be doers of the Word and not hearers only.”

Is the Bible in conflict with itself? Are we to obey the Law as given by Moses or are we, following Jesus example, to toss kosher out the window and focus not on what our bodies take in, but what virtues and graces flow out? To answer our questions, we must step back a few
feet and consider what these Scriptures are both *telling* and *showing* us in 2018. If I may be so bold, it seems to me that from Moses to Jesus to James, every sentence is asking the question of the day: In light of what’s happening in the Church, “What does it mean to live a holy life”? 

That’s a serious question today. When I think of a holy life, I think of monks and nuns who live under the Benedictine, Franciscan, or Trappist rules. A “holy life” focuses on people who have taken vows, received ordination, and serve the Church. To be “holy” is to be set apart for God’s service: a collar, a habit, cloistered spaces and strict observances. Right? Well, of course.

But is there another definition of “holy”? Don’t misunderstand or hear me diminishing the role and high calling of ordained men and women. A priest or minister’s ordination is sacred, a daily reminder that God’s Church has called one to pastoral ministry. But what about everyone else? Is it possible for all God’s people—ordained and laity alike—to live a holy life? If it is, what would that look like?
If we begin our journey with Moses, we discover that the God of Israel, unlike the gods and deities of the nations, traveled with God’s people. The Holy One we meet in the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures did not inhabit stone temples and sacred places. It was Moses who led the people to build a tabernacle—a moveable tent—pitched in the center of the camp as a reminder that God was with them wherever they went.

So, a holy life is keenly aware of God’s presence and power. Think about your mental pictures of men and women in whose lives you sense deep faith. Without exception, you will see, as have I, that each of them believes they “live and move and have their being” in the presence of God. Being holy has little to do with a shrine, temple, or imagined sacred place and everything to do with an awareness that life is lived in God’s presence from birth to death. The sheer absurdity of looking for God is, as C.S. Lewis noted long ago, imaging the mouse looking for the
A holy life celebrates and honors God’s presence no matter where life takes us or what life may require from us.

A second insight comes from James. **A holy life is focused on the Gospel’s call to action.** We are to be “doers of the Word and not hearers only.” As a child, you were taught you how to pray. You might have been told, as I was, to bow your head and close your eyes. A pattern became a posture and a posture a behavior as, even to this day, we bow heads, and close our eyes.

Such lessons helped us as children to focus on God, to look within, to find stillness and quiet amidst our noisy world. Is there a downside to pray with head bowed and eyes closed? Could our posture too narrowly define faith’s journey as inward, quiet, and private? Our Scriptures may show us another way. A holy life may begin with being a “hearer of the Word,” but surely We cannot stop there. In fact, our Lord calls all hearers of the Gospel to be ambassadors for the Gospel. Of course, faith includes great truths we believe and understand, but how do we live?. To
be holy is to offer a hand of compassion, a cup of cold water, a forgiving heart and an outstretched hand.

This focus on action, by definition, then takes a step further when we express what we believe in community with others. The word “church” has certainly been struck in these hard times. Every survey done among adults reveals the decline in church affiliation and attendance. Though we are blessed by the gift of many young adults, many more stay way, citing the church as irrelevant. Have we allowed the word “holy” to be unlinked from the word “community”?

Living a holy life does not mean living a solitary, isolated, unconnected existence. God’s people from Moses to David to the prophets, Jesus, and the early church always found holiness in relationship with others. To be sure, there are times in all our lives when we need to retreat into a season of solitude and introspection. Having alone time with God is formative and empowering. But the model of a holy life is revealed in our Lord’s calling 12 disciples, the thousands
who became God’s church on the Day of Pentecost, the Christian communities birthed through the ministry of St. Paul and many others in the first century. At every turn, being holy meant and means being connected to others.

Aware of God’s presence, a focus on doing the Gospel, sharing that good work in fellowship with others steps into what seems to be the ultimate expression of holiness: being a people of blessing. Early in our Lord’s ministry, thousands gathered on a hillside in Galilee to hear him offer what we call The Sermon on the Mount. That greatest of all homilies ever spoken begins with a series of blessings. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven” and “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” are just two of those timeless sentences.

Our Lord’s entire ministry found its focus in blessing. When he healed the lame, gave sight to the blind, fed the hungry, sat with sinners, and forgave outcasts, he gifted men and women whose lives were
spiritually dead…. with life, joy, purpose, and wonder. His holy life, his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection showed us the way of blessing is God’s way. Nothing else matters more!

What does it mean to live a holy life? Holy orders, holy places, holy devotions, holy words? That is certainly one way. But the Scriptures seem to be saying something different… that to live a holy life finds each of us aware that we live in God’s presence, called to share in word and deed God’s love, shared in community and focused on blessing. With all that is happening in the Church, in God’s name, get busy living that kind of a holy life. Do so and you will see God’s Kingdom come and God’s will be done on earth even as it is in heaven.

Amen.