

JAMES - SOUNDNESS OF SOUL FROM THE INSIDE OUT - Part seven

Teaching #1811 - Sunday, June 14th, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

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THE ONLY QUESTION THAT MATTERS - WHAT DOES GOD THINK OF OUR RELIGION?

James 1:26-27 - "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."

It's not hard to see the progression of James' thought in these verses. He is, in typical James-like style, pressing his issue with sharper and sharper detail. "**Receiving the implanted Word**" in **verse 21** becomes "**doing the Word**" in **verse 22**. Now James will carve out **three ways to "do" the Word**. Each of these areas is mentioned here only briefly, but will be picked up again in detail in the remaining 4 chapters, so, in a sense, these two short verses we're studying today set the tone for the rest of the entire letter.

The three areas James will cover are **control of speech, love and concern for the hurting and helpless, and diligent avoidance of worldliness**. Also, it is worth noting James isn't saying this is **all** Christians must do. He isn't outlining **everything** Christians must give their attention to - as though they didn't need to pray, or read their Bibles, or evangelize the lost. What James **is** doing in these two verses is showing that **without** these three things, everything else we do is wasted energy.

Prayer to God will go unheeded if my speech is unloving or untruthful. James has already told us that **Bible study** will be short-lived and fruitless if the truth of the Scriptures isn't lived out, including our treatment of the helpless. And the world will never be reached, at least not for long, by a Christian message that isn't backed up by a transformed life of holiness. Contrary to the popular voice of the post-modern church, the more the church becomes **like** the world the less she has to **offer** the world, and the less the world needs to **receive** or **embrace** what the church has to say.

1) **CONTRARY TO POPULAR OPINION, ALL RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS ARE NOT EQUAL IN GOD'S EYES**

Perhaps we're shocked to find that our heavenly Father is **intolerant** of some religious expression. He doesn't find it all of equal truth or worth. In fact, right out of the gate, some expressions of faith are labelled by James as "**worthless**:"

James 1:26 - "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is **worthless**."

Notice something very important here. This person is not **pretending** to be religious. James is not describing a **hypocrite** in this verse. This person honestly believes he **is** religious - **If anyone thinks he is religious....**" This person is sure in his heart he is pleasing God with his chosen religious path. Measured by our culture's standards, any religion, sincerely practised is good enough.

But this person is wrong. His **sincerity** is unacceptable to God. Here's a person who, in many ways looks to be very godly. He has the appearance of something in his heart, but, whatever he has, it isn't putting him in touch **with** God. And it isn't being accepted **by** God. And what's particularly troubling for us is there's no indication this person is anything but **sincere**. He's what the media today would, in teeth-whitened, smiley, respectful tones, call a "**person of faith**."

But there's a problem. While **we** may compliment him as a "person of faith," **God** - the One whose opinion really counts - says his religion is "**worthless**." And there's a world of difference between being a "**person of faith**" and a person whose faith is "**worthless**."

Worthless faith. This kind of religion is described throughout the New Testament so we won't be able to embrace all religion as equal:

Matthew 7:21-23 - "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [22] On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' [23] And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

1 Corinthians 8:2 - "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know."

Galatians 6:3 - "For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself."

2 Timothy 3:5 - "...having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people."

There's a kind of religious observance that carries on quite acceptably in this world but is of absolutely no account before God. And Pastor James' heart bleeds with concern over this fact. He urges his church to look *under the rug* of their religion. So should we.

2) **IF YOUR RELIGION DOESN'T MAKE YOU CHRIST-LIKE IN SPEECH, IT HAS ABSOLUTELY NO WORTH IN THE EYES OF FATHER GOD**

James 1:26 - "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless."

This person is religious, but is mean, or gossiping, or untruthful, or all of the above, with his words. And this is the *first* mark of *worthless religion* James puts on the table. Why? I mean, James could have picked any sin at all to show the emptiness of this person's religion. Why does he choose this particular one? Why zero in on the words we say one to another?

- a) ***He begins with this sin because it shows an unchanged heart more vividly than almost any other.*** James is trying to illustrate a man who ***"deceives his heart" (26)*** - who is not who he imagines himself to be deep in his heart.

This man is not an atheist. He's not a bank robber. He's not a homosexual. But, for all of that, he's not as holy as he thinks. The Bible under his arm isn't changing his life. He's not ***"humbly receiving the implanted Word" (21)***, so his religious rituals and observances don't change *his* heart, and don't reach *God's* heart.

So why does James start his list with these particular sins of speech? Perhaps James would remember brother Jesus saying, ***"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."***(**Matthew 12:34**). Your words will show whether your religion is inward and powerful or just outward and self-deceiving. Like the oil dip-stick on your car's engine, your words aren't just *surface entities*.

They may float only briefly on air waves and produce sound as they reach the drum of the ear, but they are far more than just that. They are *indicators*. They are *revealers* of things beyond themselves. They show what no one else can see - what's going on *inside* the engine of your being.

So, if your religion hasn't changed the way you talk *to* people and the way you talk *about* people, the heart is still corrupt, regardless of your creed or your church attendance. And lest we think James is overstating the matter, we should read carefully the words of the Apostle John on the very same subject:

1 John 4:20 - "If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."

- b) ***Sins of speech are the best indicator of your spiritual health because they are one of the last sins to be rooted out of our lives.*** There is more of our true selves in our *words* than almost anything else we do. That's because sins of speech are so closely tied to the root of *pride* in our hearts:

3 John 9-10 - "I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. [10] So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, *talking wicked nonsense against us*. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church."

Notice the *malicious speech* mentioned in **verse 10** - ***"So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us...."*** Why does Diotrephes do this? We're told why in **verse 9** - ***"I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority."***

Human pride is invisible. Human speech isn't. The polluted speech stems from the *love of being first*. The best indicator of a deep experience of the rich grace of God in my heart is a meekness and graciousness in my approach to others. If I'm not gracious, especially to those with whom I'm upset or irritated, then I don't *know* God's grace. And whether or not I'm gracious to others is *best* revealed in the words I say *to* them, or the words I say *about* them.

3) IT'S SPIRITUALLY HEALTHY TO KNOW WHEN RELIGION IS WORTHLESS

James 1:26 - "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless."

I don't know of many pastors or teachers who would say it like that anymore. We wouldn't say his religion was worthless. We would say "He's drifted from the Lord," or, "His life isn't totally surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus," or, "He needs reviving in his soul," or, "He's just hurting from some difficult experience in his past."

But worthless! Absolutely, totally dead - gone - worthless. For those who are brave enough to face them, those words are actually designed to beg the important question - *worthless for what?* Worthless for salvation. Worthless for heaven. Worthless for pleasing God. Worthless for changing the human heart. Just worthless.

There's a certain justice of God that, as a Pastor, I've seen over and over again. God judges deceit with deceit. The Holy Spirit faithfully corrects the erring heart for a long, long time. He's infinitely patient with the repentant and the teachable.

But He won't play games with us. The Holy Spirit never works with *cagey* people. It's as if there eventually comes a time when it seems God turns the lights out on that stubborn, unrepentant heart and mind. You have to love and embrace the truth, or you lose a grasp of the truth. Remember that all your life. Always obey the first promptings of the Holy Spirit.

He "*deceives his heart*" (26). Those have to be three of the scariest words in the whole Bible. You see them in **verses 22 and 26** of this first chapter of James - "**But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves....[26].... If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.**"

Here's the complex truth I'm trying to make clear from these powerful verses. They aren't easy words for us to get our heads around. The truth they hold forth is *pungent* truth. You only control the responses of your own heart to truth at the early stages of hearing it. If you continually dodge and dance with truth, *your capacity to make up your own mind about truth slips out of your hands*. Other forces take over. That's the edge of truth James is sharpening for us. People who don't realize this are *deceiving themselves* because they think they are still in control of their lives.

4) TO BE CLEAN BEFORE GOD YOU MUST BE CLEAN IN YOUR MOTIVES

James 1:27 - "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."

Notice the sharp contrast between these two verses - "If anyone *thinks* he is religious...." (26) and "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father...." (27). There's all the difference in the world in those verses. There's the way *I* look at things and there's the way *God* looks at things. And the point is simple. God's viewpoint is the decisive one.

James is driving home a very basic point here. God's perspective is the only one that matters in the long run so I'd better learn to view things from that perspective now. We need to line up with what He's looking for in our lives, and James tells us what that is in two beautiful words: "*pure*" and "*undefiled*" - "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is....*" (27).

He's talking about *inward purity of motive* - a *simple hunger to please God* - no *desire for show* - no *carelessly going through religious ceremonies* - always *looking to the state of the heart* - *not governed by the fads of this world or the opinions of others* - always *looking to the will of Father God*. That's why James so carefully words his description of true religion as "*....Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is....*" (27).

David kept this *God consciousness* at the center of all his activities:

Psalm 16:8 - "I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."

Psalm 119:168 - "I keep your precepts and testimonies, for all my ways are before you."

Notice the careful wording in those verses: "**I have set the Lord always before me**" Then he says, "**All my ways are before You**." "You before me." "All my ways before You." That's how you build a heart for God that's true, undeceived, and fruitful. You just don't allow yourself to get casually caught up in the routine of your own agenda. You bring God into it all.

5) **RELIGION ISN'T MEASURED BY EXPERIENCES GAINED BUT BY SERVICE RENDERED**

James 1:27 - "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."

James will close this portion looking at the **two necessary parts to religion** God values. Very simply the two parts are **practical acts of love and service**, and **constant, alert separation from the contaminating influences of the world**.

That's what God's looking for and most people understand that. But what James wants to deal with is the **relationship** between those two parts, because it's the **relationship that is often overlooked**. If your religion is pure it will make your heart like God's. And the whole mission of God is to reclaim those who were totally helpless and needy.

The fatherless and the widows become types of those who find themselves helpless in the world, those who live in third world countries, those in the inner city, those unemployed and penniless, those addicted to drugs and alcohol. Make no mistake about it, our heart must beat the same way God's does for these people.

Avoiding sin is very important. But avoiding sin isn't serving the Lord. **Attending services** is important. But attending services isn't serving the Lord. **Working** for the Lord is **servicing** the Lord. **Giving** is very important. But we, in affluent Southern Ontario, need to remember giving isn't serving the Lord. **God wants something else, something besides your check**. You have to give something much closer to your heart than your wealth. Serving the Lord takes your **time**.

We're almost surprised God would dare to demand our time. We understand He may require stewardship of our **money**. But weekends, Saturdays, evenings, work time, family time, leisure time - those are ours by right. Because these are some of the most precious things to us God will call for some or **all** of them. It's part of the way He tests the limits you and I put on His authority. There **is** no test if what Jesus asks for isn't precious to us.

There is something very wrong happening in the church. And it's going virtually unaddressed as far as I can see. I talked with a pastor this past week who is cancelling Sunday worship and moving it to Wednesday night. When I asked him why he explained the people wanted Sunday for their family time. He was sure more people would come out on Wednesday night than Sunday morning.

The same week I chatted with a couple (they don't come to this church) who were switching churches to one that worshipped Saturday night. Now there's nothing wrong with church on Saturday night. That's not my point at all. It was the way they phrased their **reason** for the change. They says that way they could, in their exact words, "**free up**" their Sunday for the kids' soccer programs. After all, what difference does it make to Jesus whether you worship Him on Saturday night or Sunday?

And, of course, the seemingly obvious answer is "It makes no difference to Jesus whatsoever." Is that true? Well, yes, in a sense, it is true. I can love and honor and praise Jesus with His people Sunday, Wednesday, Thursday morning, or Saturday night.

But there is a deeper issue here. And it really is an **important** issue. Let's suppose the church that "**freed up**" Sunday for kids' soccer really took off. Attendance grew. Giving increased.

Everything is great with that, right? Not quite. As good as that growth is, is **everything** a gain in this picture? Was anything **lost**? I would argue that what was **lost** was far more precious to Jesus than whatever was **gained**.

What happens when people come to worship Jesus because it has been made to fit into **their** schedules? As the numbers go up (and they certainly will), what happens to the worship of people who got everything they liked about Jesus **without having to give up what was obviously more important to them?**

I mean, that's **why** the attendance grew. People got what they **wanted** and are now **happy** with it. The people **supported** the decision. They **voted** in favour by their attendance at the newly scheduled worship. The Pastor, or church board, or whoever, decided **more** people would come if they didn't have to **choose between** corporate worship and something that was very precious to them.

So there's solution to that dilemma. Simply take that choice out of the way and everybody wins. The church wins (more people - more money). My kids win (I spend my whole Sunday with them and they get to play soccer). Even Jesus doesn't mind because we still come and sing praises to His Name.

And I want to argue with all my might that I believe that something very precious was still silently and painlessly lost. Primarily **I lost** because no matter how many songs I sing on Saturday night, or how high I raise my hands, nothing will ever erase the fact that whatever words come out of my mouth in praise, **Jesus came in second**. I'm happy in my church because **I didn't have to choose my schedule over devotion to Jesus**.

But note carefully, the only **reason** I didn't have to choose wasn't love for Jesus. The church just spared me from making that decision. It allowed me to dodge facing the deepest love of my heart.

"Pastor Don, why are you making such a big deal of this?" Please try to absorb this lesson. There will come times - other times - in your Christian life when Jesus will call you to something deeper of Himself by calling you **away** from something precious to you. And your church will have **trained you** to believe there are other **options**. You will have come to believe there are other ways you can have it all.

God uses life to try to teach us otherwise. God seems to go the great lengths to show me my time isn't my own. Think about it. **Why does God allow long church services?** Again, it has to do with revealing the deepest loves of my heart. Long services (and I'm **not** arguing for needlessly long church services) help teach me **my time isn't my own**. What do I lose when worship is planned around my convenience? I lose the concept that I am not lord over my schedule any more than I'm Lord over the **rest** of my disciplined life. Jesus is. If I'm working Him in at my convenience He isn't Lord.

Remember our key point here. Religion isn't measured primarily by experienced gained, but by service rendered. And what I'm arguing here is religion that pleases God will make a pronounced claim on your **time**.

6) AS YOU SERVE THE LORD, DO IT WITH A HOLY HEART AND LIFE

James 1:27b - "... and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

How seriously do you take the danger of being polluted by the world? The pull of the world is absolutely constant. It effects everyone. It isn't something you can limit to one specific moment or one single action. It comes imperceptibly - the way the sun gives you a burn.

The assignment of discipleship is to **create counterweights to indulgent personal inclinations**. It is to keep the gravitational pull of the things of God stronger than the gravitational pull of the world. You don't inhale spiritual grace like oxygen. It takes, in the wise words of the hymn writer, **"time to be holy."**

"Time to be holy? Boy, Pastor Don, I thought God was the One who made me holy. What do you mean, it takes time to be holy?"

The hymnwriter caught a very profound truth in a nutshell. All the talk you hear about church attendance, baptism, Bible study, Family Christian Education, time in prayer, devotions, tithing, etc. - you won't take it seriously if you simply hear it as some prudish old legalism you've long since grown out of.

All of these things are used of the Spirit to create counterweights - time to cleanse and neutralize the pull and stain of the world on your life. It can't be done any other way. James knows that service and purity must be listed together and

practiced together. Service without purity won't save. And purity without service is wasted and useless.

So the next time Julie or Cathy ask you to help in Christian Education, or Pastor Kelly or Pastor Chad wants you to work with the youth, or your neighbour needs a ride to church, or some senior needs her lawn cut, will you see it as one more job that needs to be done? Or perhaps, just perhaps, can you look beneath the surface, and see one more step in the cherishing of your own soul?

Do you remember the story Jesus told about the man possessed by a demon? The demon is cast out. But the life just stays clean, swept and empty. Notice that the life didn't get **dirty**. It just stayed **empty**. Then seven more demons come back and leave the last state of the man worse than he was in the beginning.

The lesson is you can't build your Christian life by deletion. You can't just **not do** certain bad things. That may contain a certain amount of **wisdom**, but it will never make you **Christ-like**. You have to fill your life up with service to your Lord. Service keeps you pure, safe, and fruitful.