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James 1:19-27

True Religion: Receiving, Believing and Doing God's Word

Tomorrow is October 31st, and that means it's Reformation Day! It's the anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, which began a little over 500 years ago, on October 31st, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther was a Catholic monk and theology professor, but he had only just begun to recover the truths of the gospel - that we can be forgiven for our sins and declared righteous before God purely by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, trusting in what Christ did for us in his life, death, and resurrection, not in our own works or what we do! For so long, Luther was tormented by guilt for his sin; he literally beat and deprived himself, driving himself crazy trying to do enough penance for his sins to be forgiven, doing enough good works to finally be accepted by God, to change his heart and live a righteous life. But in reading the Word of God, he stumbled across the gospel - that righteousness comes not by our efforts, not by our works or the things we do, but by grace through faith in Christ alone! That gospel message is basic for most of us - but Luther didn't know; it had been forgotten in medieval Catholicism, where many taught and believed that we had to contribute to our salvation and righteousness through our own works. This is what we call *legalism*, the error of relying on our own works for righteousness and salvation. This is what we saw Paul fighting against when we went through the book of Galatians, last Spring; Paul fought against legalism with the message of the pure gospel. And this is what Luther ended up doing as well. So Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door that day, 505 years ago, beginning to challenge these false beliefs - and that spark lit off a wildfire that swept across Europe, resulting in the Protestant Reformation - the recovery of the gospel. And we can sum up the message that Luther and these other Reformers taught with 5 simple phrases - we call them the "Five Solas" (since "Sola" means alone in Latin): that we are saved and righteous before God 1. By *grace alone*, 2. Through *faith alone*, 3. In *Jesus Christ alone*, 4. On the authority of *scripture alone*, and 5. to the *glory of God alone*. Our salvation and righteousness does not come from us, our works, or what we do - it is the work of God. This is the basic gospel message that we believe in to become Christians.

But inevitably the question comes: what, then, is the role of good works? If we're saved purely by grace through faith, then does that mean that it doesn't matter if we keep on sinning?

Or that we don't have to obey God or do what the Bible says? Or to ask it differently: is it essential for Christians to fight sin and obey God? The book of James is very helpful for addressing this issue. If Paul was fighting against the error of *legalism*, James is fighting against the opposite error - "*nominal Christianity*" - being Christian in name only, but never repenting from sin, never obeying God or growing spiritually. Our passage this morning, James 1:19-27, warns us that if we merely *hear* the gospel and the Word of God but don't *receive and do it* through faith - if it doesn't lead to change and action in our hearts and lives - then we may *claim* to be Christians, but we really just deceive ourselves, and our religion is worthless. True Christians, who truly believe the gospel don't just hear the Word - we do it. It transforms our hearts, necessarily changing the way we live. So James begins the passage by giving specific, practical commands of how we should and should not live. But then, in the bulk of the passage vv.21-25, he shifts into telling us *why* it is so important that we do this; and then, afterwards, James comes back around to these practical commands in vv.26-27, giving very specific examples of how the gospel should change the way we live if we're truly Christians. So that's what I want to do in this sermon: first, I want us to grasp the core truth of this passage - that true Christians are not merely hearers, but doers of the Word; I think the passage will make the most sense to us once we grasp the middle part first. And then, I want to walk through three examples James gives us for what this looks like.

So point number one:

I. True Christians Don't Just Hear the Word of Truth, they Believe and Do it (1:21-25)

James begins, in vv.19 and 20, by giving some practical commands about how we should and should not live (which we will come back to later). After telling us that the anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness of God, he then tells us what *does* produce the righteousness of God, in v.21: "Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." The idea here is of repentance and faith - he's calling us to repent and turn away from sin and worldliness and to instead humbly receive the Word through faith. And when he says "word," he's probably referring back to "word of truth," in v.18 - that is, the gospel of Christ, which is able to save our souls from the Hell we deserve. But James isn't talking about conversion here in v.21; he's not telling us to become Christians (unless you're not a Christian, and then the application for you would certainly be to become a Christian by believing the gospel, which is able to save your soul!). But

James is primarily speaking to believers, not non-Christians. He begins the section addressing “my beloved brothers and sisters” - that is, fellow Christians.

So why, then, does he tell those of us who are *already* Christians to receive the word of truth, “which is able to save your souls”? It’s because the salvation he’s talking about here is an ongoing process. Many times when we talk about salvation, we talk about it as something that has already happened - we say that we *are* saved, or we talk about how we *were saved*, when we became Christians; and this is perfectly good and right! The Bible talks that way as well. But the Bible *also* talks about salvation as something that is still on-going, something that is not yet complete but will be finished when we finally reach Heaven. So in one sense, we are saved - the second we become Christians, we are forgiven and declared righteous, our eternal destiny secured! But in another sense, we *are still being saved*. We have been justified, we will be glorified, and in the meantime, we are being sanctified - that is, progressively growing in holiness and righteousness, becoming more like Christ. And this happens as we humbly receive “the implanted word” - that is, the Word of Truth, the gospel, implanted within our hearts. The gospel changes our hearts and transforms our lives!

Therefore, truly receiving the word of truth means that we don’t just *hear* it, but we *do* it. Receiving God’s Word with faith necessarily results in *acting upon it, actively responding to it*. We see this in v.22: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. He’s saying that it’s not enough to merely hear the word of truth - we have to *receive* it, to accept it, to respond to it through repentance and faith, and that if we do this, then this will necessarily result in a changed life. And I think we know what James is getting at here because we see a similar kind of thing play out in life all the time. Let’s say I tell my son to pick up his toys, and he nods and says yes sir - he hears me. But if he doesn’t obey and pick up the toys, then it doesn’t matter that he heard and said yes sir - he heard me, but he didn’t actually *accept* what I said or rightly respond to it. It’s the same way with us and the gospel, and all of God’s Word, the Bible. If someone hears the Word of Truth, they may say they believe it, but if they don’t act upon it - if they don’t *do* it - then we know that they have not truly accepted it through faith. Therefore, if someone claims to be a believer, but never shows any signs of accepting and obeying God’s Word, then they are just deceiving themselves - they aren’t really a Christian because they clearly aren’t responding to the Word of truth with genuine faith.

James gives us another illustration in vv.23-24: “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.” The idea here is someone who looks in the mirror, sees things that need to be addressed, but instead of fixing them, just ignores them; he walks away, and forgets what he saw. Imagine waking up in the morning and getting ready for school or to go to work, and right before you leave, you walk in the bathroom and look in the mirror; you're hair is a mess, there's something brown all over your face, you've got spinach in your teeth, and your clothes are dirty. But then, instead of addressing everything that's wrong - instead of combing your hair, flossing and brushing your teeth, and cleaning up - you say, “Man, I look awful!” then walk out the door and head off to school or work, forgetting what you saw in the mirror. And we all know that that's just ridiculous right? Who in their right mind would do that! And that's exactly James's point.

This is exactly what it's like when someone is merely a hearer of the Word of truth but not a doer. They hear God's Word but don't truly respond in their hearts - and therefore, they don't respond with their actions, either. The Bible shows them their sin, and shows them what to do - but then, they don't do anything about it; they don't repent, they don't make any changes, they don't strive to obey, they just keep going on with their sinful lifestyle with no changes whatsoever. This person hears the gospel, even says they believe it, and yet they never make any attempts to turn from their sin and genuinely trust Christ. This person hears the Word of God preached, reads clear commands from God - but then walks right out the door and doesn't obey. This warns us against “nominal Christianity” - against being a Christian in name only. they hear it, but they don't really accept or receive it; it's not implanted within them, it hasn't changed their heart; and we know this, because they *don't do it*. What James is telling us is that such a person is *deceiving themselves*. They're lying to themselves if they think they're really a Christian. They may say they are a Christian, they may say they believe, but if they hear God's Word and never respond to it - if they never repent from sin, never strive to obey, never put their faith into action - then it becomes clear that there is no real faith there. Actions speak louder than words. If you see something wrong with yourself in the mirror, and you really believe it's wrong, you'll fix it.

Likewise, if you really believe the Word of God, you'll do it. Not perfectly - but there will be a genuine response to the word in your actions; you'll strive to do it. We see this in v.25:“But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no

hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” (V.25) We expect James to stick with the illustration - to say that this person looks in the mirror, sees his messy hair and dirty face and does something about it. But James lets us fill in the blanks and he jumps straight to the application: unlike the one who merely hears but walks away and ignores it, this person doesn't just hear - he receives it, accepts it, believes it, and begins to make efforts to do it. This person looks into “the perfect law, the law of liberty.” We expect him to say “the word” - but he doesn't, he says law. But he's not referring to the Law of Moses, the Old Covenant Law - that Law is never referred to as “perfect” or as one of liberty. Remember how Paul spoke of it in Galatians 3 and 4? The law “imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22). The Law of Moses imprisoned us in sin and death because we were unable to keep it; but it's entire purpose was to point forward to Christ it's fulfillment! So when James says the “perfect law,” he means “fulfilled law” - that is, fulfilled in Christ. He's referring to what Paul calls the “law of Christ,” the law of love - James means the same thing, calling it the “law of liberty.” The Old Covenant Law has been fulfilled in Christ; and Christ has ushered in a *new covenant* - and under this covenant, God writes his law on our hearts, just like God promised in Jer. 31:33: “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I shall be their God, and they shall be my people.” When we become Christians by believing in the gospel, God's Word of truth, God changes our hearts and turns us into new people. “Of his own will God brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (v.18). This word of truth, the gospel, is “implanted” in our hearts (v21), changing us, so that we repent from sin, receive the Word of God through faith, and strive to obey! God writes his law on our hearts! We look into God's Word and see the law of love, the law of Christ, the law that liberates - God changes our hearts so that we increasingly hate sin and increasingly love Christ, becoming more and more like Him. We strive to obey the Word of God as fulfilled in Christ, becoming more like Jesus in all that we do! And this is a law of liberty because God actually changes our hearts and desires so that we *want* to listen and obey! And this is why good works and obedience are an absolutely essential mark of every true Christian.

Now, I want to be *very clear* - James is not saying that we are saved by our doing. We are saved by grace through faith alone! But if we really receive the gospel of Christ through faith,

then we will *do* the Word, repent from sin and grow in obedience. James is saying that this is what necessarily happens in the life of *every real Christian* - if you're a Christian God has changed your heart, and is continuing to change it. The real Christian receives God's Word of Truth and desires to *do it*. No, real Christians are not perfect; yes, we all still sin. But true Christians live changed lives, regularly turning from sin, desires to obey God, and making progress to grow spiritually and be more like Christ, loving and obeying him more and more. And the real Christian doesn't just do this once or for a season, but, James says, this real Christian "*perseveres*, being not a hearer who forgets but a doer who acts." Real Christians persevere to the end - and again, this is because real Christians are those who have *new hearts*, who have been transformed by God's grace.

True religion, true Christianity, true faith is active, repentant, and obedient; genuine faith in Christ is necessarily followed by works, by becoming more like Christ and persevering in active faith to the end - until death or until Christ returns. This is true for every area in our life. And this is why James now turns to address some specific, practical issues. In vv.26-27, he fleshes out what "true religion," true Christianity, does and does not look like, by applying this principle to specific examples. These areas are not an *exhaustive* or complete list of what real Christianity looks like, but specific examples of where James's readers were probably struggling, and needed to be corrected. Sure enough, the applications he gives here at the end sound very similar to the ones he gave at the beginning of the passage, in vv.19-21. So I want to walk through each of these applications, seeing them as specific examples of what it looks like for us to not just hear the Word of Christ, but to believe and do it.

So we begin with our speech and anger...

II. True Christians Should Control their Speech and Anger (1:19-20, 26)

We see this in v.26: "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." James is giving us an example of what it looks like to be a hearer of the Word only and not a doer; the person who claims to be religious, to be a Christian, but doesn't bridle his tongue, deceives himself and his "religion," his claim to Christianity, is "worthless." So what does it mean to "bridle" our "tongue"? A bit and bridle are used to control a horse and guide it in the direction that you want it to go. Therefore, the idea here is that Christians are supposed to show restraint and self-control in our speech, only speaking in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. Now we might pause here and ask, "Why is this so

important? Isn't it a little extreme to say that if someone doesn't control their tongue then their religion, their claim to Christian faith, is *worthless*?" The reason why James uses such strong language here is because our words reflect what's in our hearts; as Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). Faith is a matter of the heart; and as we've just seen, real Christians have *changed, new hearts*, with God's Word implanted within. Therefore, our words are hugely important because they reflect our hearts. And, therefore, it is very *Christian and Christ-like* of us to strive to do God's Word by controlling our tongues. Now, again, he's not saying that if we *ever* mess up in our speech, then we aren't Christians. No, of course not; if that were the case, there would be no real Christians! But the point is we should all be repenting of our unbridled tongues and striving to use them in godly ways.

As Christians, we should never be people that make it a practice to lie, slander, tear down others, spread gossip and rumors, manipulate and flatter people, speak harshly, who yell and scream and insult, who speak thoughtlessly, hastily, or carelessly. Instead, we should use our speech to encourage, edify, uplift, gently correct, thoughtfully and carefully correct, comfort, speak truth, share the gospel, and praise God. And this brings us back to where James started in the passage; look back at v.19: "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." It is good, wise, and godly for us to show restraint in our speech, to be quick to hear what others have to say and to be slow to speak. In our pride, we want to assume we already know what to say, to cut others off, or to just not care enough to listen; but we must show restraint, out of love for the person we're speaking with. As the wise sage Treebeard the Tree Ent from Lord of the Rings is fond of saying, "Don't be hasty!" Treebeard is a talking tree; trees take a long time to grow, and they take a long time to talk, too, apparently. But we could learn from Treebeard. We should be quick to listen and hear others out, and slower to speak - and this doesn't necessarily mean how fast or slow we talk, it means that we should think through what we're saying, to make sure it is in line with God's Word of Truth, and the law of Christ. The point is to love God and love others with our speech.

And this is why James also connects this to our anger - we are to be slow to speak *and slow to anger*. After all, how often do we say things that we don't mean, or hastily say something that we regret? How often do we get mad and fly off the handle, hurting other people with our harsh tongues? This is but another reminder that our words reflect our hearts - often times to our own embarrassment. So we should be bridle our tongues, being slow to speak and slow to anger,

because, James says, “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (v.19). Yes, there is such a thing as righteous anger. But the vast majority of the time, our hearts are far too prone to fall into the anger of man, not the anger of God. And the anger of man doesn’t produce righteousness - not in us, or the people we angrily snap at. This verse is convicting for me, and I find it helpful to apply to my parenting. When I get frustrated, I can be very tempted to respond in anger, to be harsh in my correction, to discipline angrily. But that doesn’t actually do any good! My selfish, impatient angry words are utterly incapable of producing the righteousness of God in my children - or anyone else. Instead I have to repent of that, bring it to the Lord, and ask for His grace to bite my tongue and instead be loving, gentle, patient, and kind, even when being stern, giving, correction, or discipline.

And there are many more applications we could all make to the way we speak and in managing our anger, aren’t there? So let us not just hear this and forget it, but let us receive this Word and do it, by God’s grace, more and more.

Next, we see that...

III. True Christians Should Care for the Helpless and Needy (1:27a)

Look back down at the bottom of the passage, in v.27. James continues to give us example of what true religion, true Christianity, looks like; he now gives an example of what it looks like to *do* the word: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.” Orphans and widows represented the most helpless, needy, and vulnerable of people when James was writing this letter. James is saying that if our hearts are really changed by the Word of God, then we should care for the helpless and needy just God our Father cares for us. We should be moved by love and care for the fatherless, for elderly widows who struggle to make ends meet; for the single mom struggling to provide and care for her kids; and so on and so forth. This is why so many Christians support women and children in need, support orphanages, adopt and foster children, and care for the helpless, the disabled, the homeless, poor and needy. I also think it’s a fair application of this to say that it is very Christian of us to advocate for and protect the lives of the unborn, in a day and age where so many call for abortion to be on demand and limitless. You can’t get any more helpless and vulnerable than an unborn baby, can you? That’s why so many Christians and churches support crisis pregnancy centers - both protecting the unborn baby, and also caring for the single mom that’s struggling. It’s Christian to do so.

And this is also why we see the New Testament place such an emphasis on caring for widows and orphans *within the context of the local church*. Just think of 1 Tim. 5, where Paul gives detailed instructions for which widows should and should not be on the list for receiving financial support from the church. We may not be able to take care of all the widows, orphans, and helpless people in the world, not even in our town - but we *can and should* strive for our church community, at the very least, to be a place where every child and woman, every person is cared for, loved, provided for, protected and defended. We should seek to care for the most helpless, needy, and vulnerable as we are able - and *especially so* in the household of faith, the church family. To not do so would just be un-Christian.

Finally, James concludes with a more general application:

IV. True Christians Should Pursue Personal Holiness (1:21, 27b)

V.27 continues “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this... to keep oneself *unstained from the world*.” Again, this brings us right back where James started. Look back to the top of the passage, in v.21: “Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word of truth, which is able to save your souls.” The idea here is stripping of moral filth and wickedness just like we would take off a dirty shirt or mud-stained jacket. James ends where he began, making the point clear: we should be not just hearers, but doers, so that *whatever stain of sin, immorality, wickedness, or worldliness* that we find in ourselves when we look into the mirror of God’s Word, we must *repent* of it and pursue moral purity, personal holiness. And this has been James’s point all along, hasn’t it? Genuine faith in Christ is an active, obedient faith. If we are trusting in Christ alone for salvation, then let us pursue Christ in all that we do.

As Christians, we’re called to live counter-culturally - to be in the world, but not of the world. We’re called to constantly recognize, confess, and repent of our sins, to turn to Christ, and have our hearts and minds renewed by His Word. We’re called to fight our sin and to grow in personal holiness by looking to Christ, remembering the gospel, and living in light of it. All of us should make it our goal - for ourselves *and each other* - to put away moral filthiness and wickedness, to grow in personal holiness, and to be morally pure, unstained from the wickedness of the unbelieving world around us.

Let us pursue holiness, seeking to grow in Christ and become more like Him. Let us commit ourselves, as individuals and families, to regularly reading the Bible, meditating on it

and putting it into practice, praying to God, repenting from and confessing our sins, making changes in our lives to obey God more, and being an active member of the church community. As a church, let us be committed to obeying the Lord in all things, and helping each other grow in Christ, so that we may all do the Word and persevere to the end, being blessed in our doing! Let us hear the Word of God, the Law of Christ, and do it, by His grace. Let us not be mere hearers, but doers! Let us respond to God's Word of truth with obedient faith!

And one special way God has given us to actively respond to His Word is by coming to the Lord's Table, taking the Lord's Supper together. When we do this, we're physically and visibly proclaiming that we aren't just hearing the gospel, but that we believe it and are *doing it*. So if you're a baptized believer in good standing with a gospel-preaching church, I invite you to come to the table with us in just a moment.

But if you're not a believer, there's a different way for you to respond: I invite you to not just hear the gospel, but to receive, believe, and obey it! Believe that Jesus Christ did everything necessary to save you from your sins, and trust in Him alone! And the very first command God gives new believers is to be baptized, where you can publicly profess your faith and demonstrate that you aren't just hearing the gospel, but you're believing and doing it. If that's you this morning, please come and find me after the service. Let us have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the table.