

James 1:19-27 - True Religion

Last time we read “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures” (James 1:18). This means that God was self-motivated to save us, His love for us is simply a part of His nature, and it has nothing to do with how good we may or may not be — we are saved by grace, not by works. Salvation is a gift that no one can boast about (Ephesians 2:8-9). We also learnt that we are born again or “brought forth” by the word of truth, which is the word of God (John 17:17). The effect of this is to make us “a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” This basically means that we are started on the path of change that results in us becoming like our Creator. The following section of James now gets practical. If we are the “firstfruits of His creatures,” then how should we behave?

This week we will cover James 1:17-27 and will learn what true religion looks like; what thoughts, words, and deeds, are pleasing to God and reflect His nature. This includes the importance of listening before we speak, how only the word of God is able to save our souls, being a doer and not just a hearer, and what true repentance looks like — a changed life which is focused on serving others, just like Jesus didn’t come to be served, but to serve.

Let’s read together our memory verses for the book of James:

James 1:2-4 NKJV

² My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, ³ knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. ⁴ But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

For today’s message we’ll start reading at verse 16 to get the context.

James 1:16-27 NKJV

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. ¹⁸ Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. ¹⁹ So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; ²⁰ for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

²¹ Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. ²⁵ But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶ If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion *is* useless. ²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

Learning to Listen

James 1:19-20 NKJV

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; ²⁰ for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Now we have been born again, we are new creations. We should be living a changed life. One of the first things to change must be our tongue. Here James is warning about the sins of the tongue.

This is not a new concept in the bible. Consider:

Proverbs 14:29 NkJV

*He who is slow to wrath has great understanding,
But he who is impulsive exalts folly.*

Proverbs 14:29 NLT

People with understanding control their anger;
a hot temper shows great foolishness.

Proverbs 15:18 NKJV

A wrathful man stirs up strife,
But *he who is slow to anger* allays contention.

Proverbs 15:18 NLT

A hot-tempered person starts fights;
a cool-tempered person stops them.

Proverbs 16:32 NKJV

*He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
And he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.*

Proverbs 16:32 NLT

Better to be patient than powerful;
better to have self-control than to conquer a city.

Proverbs 19:11 NKJV

The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger,
And his glory *is* to overlook a transgression.

Proverbs 19:11 NLT

Sensible people control their temper;
they earn respect by overlooking wrongs.

A couple of quotes:

Expositors Bible Commentary: "A continual talker cannot hear what anyone else is saying and by the same token will not hear when God speaks. Finally, the restraint of anger is demanded, for anger closes the mind to God's truth. A fiercely argumentative attitude is not conducive to the humble reception of truth."

Jon Courson: ‘In talking to the believers dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, undergoing unbelievable persecution, James says, “Don’t forget that God is good. And what’s happening in you is going to work for good ultimately. Therefore, don’t be cynical; don’t be quick to complain about your situation. Instead, stop speaking and start listening—and you’ll hear God’s voice in your trial.”’

There is definitely a lot of wisdom in learning to listen before we speak; so we can learn, understand others, receive correction, receive truth, and gain perspective in difficult situations.

v 19 What is **wrath**: How is wrath different to anger? Anger is an emotion, wrath is the outward expression of that anger. Anger can smoulder under the surface while you fake a smile, but there is no hiding wrath. The Greek word *orge* translated “**wrath**” means: natural impulse, punishment, rage, punishing destructive anger, outbursts of anger, fierce anger, greatly angered, one’s temper, passion, and indignation.

v 19 **Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath**: How can we learn to be **slow to wrath**? We must first learn to be **swift to hear** and **slow to speak**. Most of the time our anger and wrath comes from being *self-centred* and not *others-centred*. **Swift to hear** and **slow to speak** are both ways to be *others-centred*.

v 20 **Slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God**: Why should we be **slow to wrath**? Because our wrath does not accomplish the **righteousness of God**. When we express **wrath** it is almost always us trying to get our own way, to defend our own interests. It is almost always an expression of our own self-centredness.

This is why we must be **swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath**, because then we can evaluate if the anger we are experiencing is a selfish anger because someone is violating my rights, or because I am, like Jesus, genuinely upset for the sake of others — an others-centred reaction.

Jesus driving out the money changers and merchants in the temple is a great example of someone being **swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath**.

John 2:13-17 (Jesus cleanses the temple)

Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. ¹⁵ When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers’ money and overturned the tables. ¹⁶ And He said to those who sold doves, “Take these things away! Do not make My Father’s house a house of merchandise!” ¹⁷ Then His disciples remembered that it was written, “*Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.*”

“Zeal for Your house has eaten me up.” Wow, Jesus was really angry, even wrathful, but not because of how He was treated, but rather because of the tremendous disservice that the priests were doing to the people — they were hindering or blocking their access to God because of their greed and materialism. They were misrepresenting God. This is something that should make us all upset — people being turned away from saving faith and therefore destined for hell, eternity in the Lake of Fire.

It's important that we learn from how Jesus expressed His anger, His wrath. He expressed His anger, but in a controlled way. He first sat down and spent a considerable amount of time making a whip of cords. This was not a cruel and destructive cat-a-nine-tails kind of whip — it was just made up of some thin chords or ropes woven together. Consider Jesus example:

1. He spend time listening and observing what was going on (**swift to hear**)
2. He didn't say anything to them initially (**slow to speak**)
3. When He did finally make His move, it was in a controlled manner (**slow to wrath**), as demonstrated when He asked those who sold doves to take them out of the temple.

Jesus was really angry, but His anger was controlled, to the point where He didn't want to even harm the birds in the cages — He was still showing compassion, empathy and gentleness. This is an important attribute of God; He always shows mercy in judgement, and if we are to be like Him, then so should we.

Mediate on this, and consider what we say to and about others when we see wrong doing, especially those who preach a false gospel which is hindering people from coming to repentance and saving faith in Christ. Are we being **swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath**. Are we producing **the righteousness of God**, or being yet another person, who through their uncontrolled wrath, is also turning people away from the gospel as we also misrepresent God in our respond to apostate Christians? I've found it very helpful to give plenty of time, at least a week, before I respond to situations like these. This gives me perspective and allows me to hear God's voice and understand God's heart through His word.

True Repentance Leads to Real Change - True Religion

James 1:21-25

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. ²⁵ But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

James 1:21 — *Standing firm against the lusts of the flesh*

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

v 21 **and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls:** We are saved by faith that comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17). However, being saved from the penalty of my sins (being justified), is only the start. We need to continue to receive the word of God if we are going to be saved from the power of sin. This practical outworking of our salvation is called sanctification.

Someone said that “sin is the devil’s vomit,” and it stinks. The filthiness and overflow of wickedness is here contrasted with the new life that results from the transforming power of the word of God *which we only experience when we **receive** it*. The word of God is how God changes us, transforming us into His own image — but it must be received, or put into action, or it is useless.

This contrast between the lusts of the flesh or desires of the human nature, described here in James as **all filthiness and overflow of wickedness**, and the fruit of the Spirit can be summarised by:

Galatians 5:17-25 NLT

The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. ¹⁸ But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

¹⁹ When you follow the desires of your sinful nature [**all filthiness and overflow of wickedness**], the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarrelling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

²² But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. ²⁵ Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.

Galatians 5:24 says that “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there.” James here tells us how — by meekly or humbly receiving the implanted word — which means we have a teachable heart. What this means is that we no longer live by what we think is good or right, but willingly choose to submit to what *God* says in the bible says is good and right. Only then will Galatians 5:25 be true for us; “Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives.”

In summary, James is showing us the spiritual power of God’s word. David Guzik puts it this way; “The word of God carries the power of God.” This is why reading, studying, and meditating on the word of God daily is so important for us. We will stay stuck in sin if we don’t, and remain a slave to the power of sin. The degree that we will change now is dependant upon both how much time we give to reading the word, and also how much we put into practice (how meek, humble or teachable we are).

Romans 12:2 NKJV

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Again, the opposite to being conformed to the world (**all filthiness and overflow of wickedness**) is being transformed by the renewing of our mind, and of course this renewing and transformation only happens by the power of the word of God. Jesus makes this clear in:

John 17:17 NKJV

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.

John 17:17 NLT

Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth.

I'll finish this section off with a couple of my favourite verses from what is probably the greatest chapter in the whole bible, the one that refers to and magnifies the word of God in almost every verse:

Psalm 119:11 NKJV

Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You.

Psalm 119:9 NKJV

How can a young man cleanse his way?
By taking heed according to Your word.

v 21 **Receive with meekness the implanted word:** Spurgeon says about the word **receive**: “The first thing, then, is *receive*. That word ‘receive’ is a very instructive gospel word; it is the door through which God’s grace enters to us. We are not saved by working, but by receiving; not by what we give to God, but by what God gives to us, and we receive from him.” (Spurgeon)

How to receive the word of God

v 22 **But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves:** David Guzik: “We must receive God’s word as **doers**, not merely **hearers**. To take comfort in the fact you have heard God’s word when you haven’t *done* it is to deceive yourself. It was common in the ancient world for people to hear a teacher. If you followed the teacher and tried to *live* what he said, you were called a *disciple* of that teacher. We may say that Jesus is looking for disciples: doers, not mere hearers.”

Jesus also taught on this in:

Matthew 7:24–27

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: ²⁵ and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.

²⁶ “But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: ²⁷ and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”

The one who hears and obeys will be able to withstand the storms of life — they will be strong. However, those who hear what is spoken, but don't obey it, will come to sudden destruction — and their fall will be great.

Here are some quotes that help us to see how this works practically:

Moffatt: "A teacher or preacher may give an eloquent address on the gospel, or explain ably some O.T. prophecy about Christ, but when the sermon is done, it is not done; something remains to be done by the hearers in life, and if they content themselves with sentimental admiration or with enjoying the emotional or mental treat, they need not imagine that this is religion."

Spurgeon: "I fear we have many such in all congregations; admiring hearers, affectionate hearers, attached hearers, but all the while unblest hearers, because they are not doers of the word."

"You know the old story; I am half ashamed to repeat it again, but it is so pat to the point. When Donald came out of church sooner than usual, Sandy said to him, 'What, Donald, is the sermon all done?' 'No,' said Donald, 'it is all said, but it is not begun to be done yet.'"

Someone once gave me some sound advice; when you hear a sermon, think of at least one thing that you can put into practice.

v 23-24 **For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was:** this is plain foolishness. Any truth a person like this receives concerning their walk with God and their character does no good in his life because it's not applied. But personally, I think it applies to all of us at least some of the time. I know that I have been slow to apply truth from the word of God many times. I may know something is wrong, but justify or continue doing it anyway. Thankfully God is very patient and over the years, there has been change. In many areas of my life I have finally submitted, became teachable, and finally put into practice what I had known for a long time. How much further down the road to sanctification would I be now if I had only been more willing to obey previously.

Just imagine doing this with your physical appearance. I go to the mirror, carefully observe that I have Vegemite smeared all around my mouth, bogies hanging out of my nose, lettuce in my teeth, my hair sticking up in all directions, my shirt incorrectly buttoned up, and my cereal spilt all over my black pants. But then, as soon as I look away, I forget what I look like and go to work thinking that I am "the man", that I look great, and that I have my appearance in order and will impress those around me. In reality, all I'm doing is making a fool out of myself and shaming God.

v 23 **Observing his natural face:** David Guzik: "The ancient Greek word translated **observing** has the idea of a *careful scrutiny*. By application, James had in mind people who give a *careful scrutiny* of God's word; they may be regarded as Bible experts but it still doesn't result in *doing*."

Spurgeon: "The glass of the Word is not like our ordinary looking-glass, which merely shows us our external features; but, according to the Greek of our text, the man sees in it 'the face of his birth'; that is, the face of his nature. He that reads and hears the Word may see not only his actions there, but his motives, his desires, his inward condition."

The goal and duty of any bible teacher is to present the truth of the word as clearly as possible, without getting in the way. The doctrines of God, the truth of the word, are God's spiritual mirror that reveal to us what we are like on the inside. Like was mentioned before, the sermon may have been said, but it still remains to be done.

v 25 **But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.**: What is the benefit of studying the Word of God intently, and then doing it (**continue in it**)? We will be **blessed** in what we do, the beautiful fruits of righteousness.

v 25 **He who looks into the perfect law of liberty**: The Greek word for **looks into** spoke of a thorough examination, so that a person would even bend over to get a better look. The main point here is that, though James stressed *doing*, he did not neglect *studying* God's Word either. We should all be *looking into* God's Word, "bending over" to get a better look, so to speak. What this means practically is spending more time in the word.

v 25 The Greek word translated **continues** is *paramainas* means to; remain, stay on, remain with, stay beside, to remain faithful, to stand one's ground, and to stand fast. Once we see the state of our soul, the grace of God, the extent of our duty, and the promised glory waiting for us, we should not forget it, but rather be faithful to apply it, to **continue *in it***.

A good metaphor to help us understand this is a lady who spends a long time in front of the mirror making herself look pretty. The paint, sorry makeup, must be perfectly applied, the hair perfectly straightened and styled, the eyelashes glued on in the right place, the teeth sparkling white, and her clothes perfectly clean and ironed. She won't leave until everything is right. She will stand her ground and remain faithful to make herself look nice no matter how long it takes. We need the same commitment when it comes to our character and walk with God. Too often we look but don't continue. We are not faithful to put into practice *all* the changes that need to be made, to completely clean up the old life, to take the time and put in the required effort to remove the spots and blemishes on our character. It will take a lifetime, but remember that the result is blessing for us.

v 25 **The perfect law of liberty**: What a wonderful way to describe the Word of God, "**The perfect law of liberty**". It may seem strange to describe the New Covenant as a law, so let's find out what it means. In the New Covenant, God reveals to us a **law**, but it is a **law of liberty**. Why a law of liberty? Because it is written on our transformed hearts by the Spirit of God. The Law of the New Covenant is a freeing law, not the burdensome law of the Old Covenant. When we are saved, God gives us a new heart with new desires that want to please God, that want to obey Him. In Romans 3:27 "**The perfect law of liberty**" is referred to as the "law of faith".

Romans 3:27

Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.

Poole comments: "The whole doctrine of Scripture, or especially the gospel, called a *law*, Romans 3:27, both as it is a rule, and by reason of the power it hath over the heart; and a *law of liberty*, because it shows the way to the best liberty, freedom from sin, the bondage of the ceremonial law, the rigour of the moral, and from the wrath of God."

Examples of what it means to be a doer of the Word of God

James 1:26-27

²⁶ If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. ²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

v 26 **If anyone among you thinks he is religious:** Again we are reminded that we can so easily be deceived into thinking that we are someone that we are not. I like to say to people that ask if I am religious, "No, I'm not religious, but I do have a relationship with God."

v 26 **Thinks he is religious:** It's interesting that the New Testament never uses this Greek word for "**religious**" in a positive sense (e.g. Acts 17:22, Colossians 2:23). In the same way, James used it here of someone who is **religious**, but is not really right with God. The example he uses is someone who **does not bridle**, or control, **his tongue**. Here are two verses that show that God is not impressed with religion. Broadly speaking, religion is man's attempt to reach God. True christianity is God reaching down to man.

Acts 17:22

Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious;

Colossians 2:23

These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false* humility, and neglect of the body, *but are* of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

v 26 **This one's religion is useless:** David Guzik: "Your walk with God **is useless** if it does not translate into the way you live and the way you treat others. Many are deceived in their own heart regarding the reality of their walk with God."

This definition of religion causes me to think of legalism, the tendency to focus on appearing to be a good christian around others and keeping external observances, but being hard of heart toward God on the inside and others around them. The Jews, especially the pharisees, were especially good at this, making long prayers but then forcing a widow out of her house. These were indeed very religious, but not godly at all. Jesus ripped them in:

Matthew 23:23-26

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things. ²⁴ Blind guides! You strain your water so you won't accidentally swallow a gnat, but you swallow a camel!

²⁵ "What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! ²⁶ You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too.

v 27 **Pure and undefiled religion before God:** David Guzik: “There is a great deal of pure and undefiled religion *in the sight of man* that is not **pure and undefiled religion before God.**” This makes me think of how easy to be a man pleaser and not a God pleaser. I think the move towards ecumenicalism involves a lot of man pleasing, as people abandon the truth and purity of the gospel for the sake of uniformity. The whole thrust of ecumenicalism is that we don’t offend each other, and so truth is sacrificed.

Galatians 1:10

Obviously, I’m not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ’s servant.

v 27 **To visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world:** Being a Christian and having a real walk with God shows itself in simple, practical ways. It both helps those in need and keeps itself pure and unstained by the world’s corruption.

Spurgeon: “Charity [love] and purity [holiness] are the two great garments of Christianity.”

Clarke: “True religion does not merely *give* something for the *relief* of the distressed, but it **visits** them, it takes the *oversight of them*, it takes them under its care; so *episkeptesthai* means. It goes to their houses, and speaks to their hearts; it relieves their wants, sympathises with them in their distresses, instructs them in divine things, and recommends them to God. And all this it does for the Lord’s sake. This is the religion of Christ.”

v 27 **Unspotted from the world:** Like the boat is meant to be in the water but the water is not meant to be in the boat, so Christians are to be in the world, but not of the world or influenced by the world.

Lot in the book of Genesis is a good example of a man who was spotted by the world. He looked towards Sodom and saw that, although it was an evil place, it was a prosperous place. He then lived near the city. He then lived in the city. He then became a leader in the city. In the end he lost everything. His sin and compromise cost him everything. As the saying goes, Lot was saved only “by the skin of his teeth”, or “as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:15).

1 Corinthians 3:15 NKJV

If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Conclusion:

Meyer: “There is no book with so lofty an ideal of what life may become when it is yielded to the grace of Christ. A cleansed heart, and an unspotted robe; no sin allowed and permitted in the soul, and no evil habit allowed to dominate and enthrall the life.”

The main point of today is:

James 2:21 NKJV

Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.