

James: The Practical Christian

The Great Divorce

James 1:21-27

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Scripture

Andras Tamas is the name officials gave a certain man decades ago in a Russian psychiatric hospital. He'd been drafted into the Army, but the authorities had mistaken his native Hungarian language for the gibberish of a lunatic and had him committed.

Then they forgot about him—for 53 years!

A few years ago a psychiatrist at the hospital began to realize what had happened and helped Tamas recover the memories of who he was and where he came from. He recently returned home to Budapest as a war hero, “the last prisoner of World War II.”

Not only had this man forgotten his real name, he hadn't even seen his own face in five decades. So, according to one news account, “For hours, the old man studies his face in a mirror. The deep-set eyes. The gray stubble on the chin. The furrows of the brow. It is his face, but it is a startling revelation.”

Imagine looking at your own face in a mirror and not recognizing it. James says that is just what people are doing when they listen to God's word but do not obey it. There, right before their eyes in Scripture, is an accurate reflection of themselves. But they don't truly see—with the eyes of their hearts—what the Bible shows them.¹ So, with that in mind, let's read James 1:21-27:

²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to

¹ Tom Hundley, *Chicago Tribune* (9-6-00).

do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:21-27)

Introduction

The American novelist William Faulkner toiled for years as an unknown writer in the rural Mississippi town of Oxford before he gained recognition. When he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, his acclaim grew.

When approached later about the literary people and authors with whom he associated, Faulkner shrugged his shoulders and said he didn't know any famous literary people. He said, "The people I know are other farmers and horse people and hunters, and we talk about horses and dogs and guns and what to do about this hay crop or this cotton crop, not about literature."

Faulkner befriended real people. Unpretentious people. People who were honest about life rather than those who simply talked about it. The kind of people whose talk was backed up by their walk.

These kinds of people are rare these days. And at the root of it all is the problem of divorce. I'm not talking about the kind of divorce you normally think of, the tragedy that has broken up so many of our homes. I'm talking about an even greater divorce, a divorce that results not in broken homes but broken lives. And that is the divorce between our *knowledge* and our *practice*.

Author and Pastor A. W. Tozer once wrote:

There is an evil which in its effect upon the Christian religion may be more destructive than Communism, Romanism and Liberalism combined. . . . It is the glaring disparity between theol-

ogy and practice among professing Christians. So wide is this gulf which separates theory from practice in the church that an inquiring stranger who chances upon both would scarcely dream that there was any relation between the two of them. An intelligent observer of the human scene who heard the Sunday morning message and later watched the Sunday afternoon conduct of those who heard it would conclude that he had been examining two distinct and contrary religions. It appears to me that too many Christians want to enjoy the thrill of feeling right but are not willing to endure the inconvenience of being right. And so the divorce between theory and practice becomes permanent in fact. Truth sits forsaken and grieves till her professed followers come home for a brief visit. But she sees them depart again when the bills come due.

Lesson

It is because of this problem that James makes a special point in James 1:21-27 to show you how to build a faith that really works, to show you how to overcome this great divorce between your *knowledge* of God's Word and your *practice* of it.

In today's lesson, James shows you three steps in building a faith that really works.

I. You Need to Have a Prepared Heart (1:21a)

The first step in building a faith that really works is that you need to have a prepared heart.

Before you can even receive the word of God into your lives, James tells you that you must **“get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. . .”** (1:21a).

The image is that of a farmer who knows that he must first **get rid** of all the weeds before he plants new seeds. Weeding comes before seeding. Before you can rightly receive God's word there must be a weeding from your life of those attitudes and actions that choke out the influence of God's word.

Sin in your life will plug up your spiritual ears. The person who comes under the teaching of God's word with **moral filth and evil** in his life will never get the same message that the clean heart will get. That's the way God has designed it. That's why you must take time for confession and repentance. You need to repent and turn from your sin. You need to confess all that you have done wrong.

Your preparation needs to be more than the few moments of confession made available in the worship service. You need to take time to do business with God. You need to take time daily in the quiet of your home in order to examine your life and repent and confess your sin to God.

One of the great Puritans, Willaim Gurnall, wrote these words:

Pray not only against the power of sin, but for the power of holiness also. A haughty heart may pray against his sins, not out of any inward enmity to them, or love to holiness, but because they are troublesome guests to his conscience. His zeal is false that seems hot against sin, but is key-cold to holiness. A city is rebellious that keeps their rightful Prince out, though it receives not his enemy in.²

If you are not taking time to confess and repent, that could be one of the reasons why God's word seems to be having such little impact on your life these days, why there is such a great divorce between what you hear and what you do.

So, the first step in building a faith that really works is that you need to have a prepared heart.

II. You Need to Have a Receptive Heart (1:21b)

The second step in building a faith that really works is that you need to have a receptive heart.

² I. D. E. Thomas, *A Puritan Golden Treasury* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 139.

In verse 21b James goes on to say: **“And humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”**

The Greek word translated **“accept”** is the same word that was used of a woman welcoming her husband back from war. The soldier had been off fighting in a Roman Legion for months. There was very little mail service in those days. She had not heard from him in a long time. Now Ronnie (or Romulus!) finally comes marching home. When she sees him from a distance she can hardly contain herself. She runs toward him and accepts him with open-armed enthusiasm. That is how James is saying you ought to **accept** the word of God.

This word **“accept”** was also used of people who listened to the reading of a will. What a difference it would make in many churches when the people arrive to hear the message if they would listen that way. Imagine that a wealthy member of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church died. He left a fortune, and each church member was going to receive a large amount of money. It would be different for each person, depending on their relationship to the now-deceased church member. And let’s suppose that, on next Sunday, instead of a sermon, the will was to be read telling you what was to be yours. How do you think you would listen that day? I guarantee that no one would drift off to sleep. No child would have to make an unnecessary trip to the bathroom. You would listen with rapt attention to see what was yours.

James says that is how you should listen to the word of God. You ought to listen like a person who listens to the reading of a will.

The word translated **“humbly”** is a word that means “with gentleness.” The idea is that of having a teachable spirit. It is the person who says, “Lord, help me to be teachable. Regardless of who is teaching, I am ready to accept it, to receive it.”

Christians say things like, “Oh, I don’t like that. I don’t like the way he says, ‘God.’ Or, he doesn’t talk loud enough for me. Or, short enough. Or, long enough (that’s rare!). Or, he doesn’t tell enough stories. Or, he tells too many stories. Or, he doesn’t tell me

enough of what the Hebrew or Greek really means. Or, I wish he wouldn't talk about the Hebrew and the Greek so much."

Why are you to give God's word the proper response? James answers that at the end of verse 21. There he tells you it is because that word is the word "**which can save you.**" That word can save you not only from sin's penalty but from sin's damaging power as well.

The world in which you live is like a minefield. There are dangers on every side. God's word is like a map to guide you through it safely. If you will live in humble submission to God's word, you will be delivered from the damaging power of sin.

So, in order to build a faith that really works you need to have a prepared heart, and, second, a receptive heart.

III. You Need to Have an Obedient Heart (1:22-27)

The third step in building a faith that really works is that you need to have an obedient heart.

This is the most important of the three. For this process doesn't end once the word has been implanted. Verses 22-27 talk about the proper response once you have accepted the word. James gives you a command, an illustration, and an application.

A. The Command (1:22)

First, the command.

James says in verse 22: "**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**"

In the first century the words "**merely listen**" referred to an academic auditor, to one who audited a course in a university. If you have ever audited a class, you know that you are the most relaxed one there. Why? Because all you do is take notes. You do no assignments. You do no homework. You take no tests. You just take in information.

Perhaps there are some of you here today who are auditors. Some of you have notebooks full of notes. You would be hard-pressed to show God, or your closest friend, any real significant change in your life since you first started as a Christian.

James says that if you really want to prove yourself, then prove yourself not as one who merely audits the course but one who is a doer.

B. The Illustration (1:23-25)

Second, the illustration.

In verses 23-24 James illustrates the *forgetful hearer*: **“Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”**

This is the picture of a man who looks into the Scriptures, and after having been exposed to the truth, closes it and goes his way, quickly forgetting what God has said.

Now, verse 25 illustrates the *effective doer*: **“But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.”**

I remember hearing Dr. Howard Hendricks, professor and author, respond to the question of whether makeup was really proper for a Christian woman to wear. His response, in typical Hendricks style, was, “Lady, now don’t overdo it, but for heaven’s sake, if the barn needs painting, paint it!”

When you look into a mirror, it doesn’t play any games with you. What you see is what you are, like it or not. When you fight that early morning battle of mind over mattress, stumble into that bathroom, go over to the mirror and take a look. That’s you!

Men, those nubs sticking out of your chin, that’s you, every last nub.

Women, those hair rollers that make you look like you're trying to get a message from outer space—that's you!

What kind of person would get up in the morning, turn the bathroom light on, go over to the mirror and say, "Oh no!" and then turn off the light and leave for church? That's absurd!

But some of you do that spiritually, don't you? You open the word. You say, "What a magnificent truth. How profound. How powerful and moving. How true! Boy, I really need to be like that or do that. . . ." And then it makes no difference in your life.

James is saying that the Bible is like a mirror. It shows you who and what you really are. And when you look in that mirror and are unhappy with what you see, you have just a few options. You can smash the mirror. Many today who attack the Bible are doing just that. Or you can just ignore the mirror. Or, as James suggests, you can use it to make some much needed corrections.

Notice God's promise at the end of verse 25 to those who choose this last option. He writes that such a man **"will be blessed in what he does."**

For some years now I have been listening to people's comments about my sermons after the Sunday worship service. It's always encouraging to hear people tell me that the message was a blessing to their lives. And yet, as I've thought about it, I'm not so sure whether you can know that soon whether a message you have just heard was truly a blessing to you or not. James says that it is not until you do what it says that you can know if it has truly been a blessing to you. It is not a blessing until you actually practice it.

The story is told of a man who was late for worship one Sunday. He wanted to make it at least in time to hear the preaching of God's word. But at the very moment he arrived, the pastor finished his message. Huffing and puffing he ran into the church building and asked the usher, "Is the sermon done?"

The wise usher responded, "No my friend, the sermon still has to be done!"

It is in obeying the word of God that blessing is received.

C. *The Application (1:26-27)*

And third, the application.

What are then some specific examples of truly authentic Christianity? James says, “I’m glad you asked. I have three here on the tip of my pen.” We will close with a brief look at these.

In verses 26-27 James pictures a man who thinks he is religious. He is sure of it. But James says the real test of a faith that really works is not found in the fact that he goes to church or acts religious, but in three areas of his life.

First, in his words. In verse 26 James makes clear that if there is no divorce between the truth and your tongue, you’ve got the genuine item. James writes, **“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”**

Second, in his acts of kindness. There is no divorce between the truth and the needs of others. James writes in verse 27, **“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress. . . .”**

The phrase **orphans and widows** is almost a technical term in the Old Testament for those who are destitute. And the phrase **“to look after”** means “to get personally involved.” James says if you are doers of the word, you see evidence not only in the way you talk but in acts of kindness you do. And the thing that marks your acts of kindness is that you are kind to those who cannot pay you back; people like **orphans and widows**.

This is not the social gospel! This is real Christianity. It’s saying that you don’t mind becoming involved in not only words but in real deeds meeting real needs.

Third, in what marks him. At the end of verse 27 James writes, **“and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”** As a Christian you are to be a marked person. You are to be marked not by the world but by the word.

In John 15:3 Jesus said, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” In Romans 12:2 the apostle Paul

says to “not be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds.” Paul knew that for you to have a transforming influence on your world for Christ, you must first have your mind cleansed and transformed by the living word of God.

Consider the difference between a strong and a weak cup of tea. The same ingredients of water and tea are used for both. The difference is that the strong cup of tea is the result of the tea leaves being immersed in the water longer, allowing the tea more time to get into the water. The longer the steeping process, the stronger the cup of tea.

In the same way, James is saying that the length of time you spend in hearing and applying God’s word to your life will determine how deeply you (1) get into the word, and (2) how deeply the word gets into you.

Conclusion

Remember this principle found here: Just like the tea, the longer you are in the word, the “stronger” you will become, and the weaker will be that great divorce between your *knowledge* and your *practice*.

God uses a three-step process to help you develop a faith that really works.

First, you need to have a prepared heart.

Second, you need to have a receptive heart.

And third, you need to have an obedient heart.

May God help us all build a faith that really works. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, we know that we cannot play games with you. We freely admit to you the great divorce that exists to one degree or another in all of our lives between what we know and what we actually do. We thank you for being a God who not only knows that about us, but for doing something about it. We thank you for the good news that we can be forgiven for our failures and sins through your Son and his death for our sin. We give you thanks that through his resurrection we can now have not only a full pardon for our sins but power for living the kinds of lives you have called us to live.

Father, grant to every one of us here today the strength we need to build a faith that works, for we ask it in Jesus' Name. Amen.

CHARGE:

At the end of Jesus' life, he met with several of his disciples to encourage and strengthen them with some final words. After some time with them, he then slipped away to pray for them, for he knew that soon they would be without him. We have that prayer recorded for us in the Bible.

One phrase that Jesus used I want to leave with you today. He prayed to the Father saying, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). I want to challenge you to pray that prayer for yourself, "Sanctify me, O God, by the truth; your word is truth." As you do may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.