

Be Doers of the Word – Part 4

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – the essence of true faith is to be active doers of what God’s word commands of us
2. aim – to cause us to be active in faith, recognizing who we really are before God and doing his will
3. passage – James 1:19-27

b. outline

1. Be Quick to Listen (James 1:19-20)
2. Be Doers of the Word (James 1:21-25)
3. Be Properly Religious (James 1:26-27)

c. opening

1. the **difficulty** of this sermon
 - a. being away with family for most of the week, the constant barrage of bad news that wants us to focus *only* on hopelessness, and (now) a paragraph that *seems* to be “irrelevant” to us in the face of such bad news (**i.e.** “out of focus”) – **IOW:** give us some *good news*, preacher!
 - b. but ... we must *never forget the context* into which James was writing this letter:
 1. scattered Jewish believers, under the threat of *great persecution*
 2. believers in Jesus, struggling *without a completed canon of N.T. Scripture*
 3. followers of Christ, trying to make *a connection of faith to all of life*
 4. **IOW:** a people trying to figure out how to connect their faith in Jesus to their existence in a world filled with every form of difficulty, opposition, hostility, uncertainty, doom & gloom, etc.
2. the **thesis** of the letter
 - a. **1:22:** “*be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*”
 - b. “*the word*” = the “*word of truth*” that God has used to set believers apart from the world, implanted in us by the Spirit of God, to be embraced with humility as that word tells us *who we really are*
 1. **IOW:** to avoid one of **the most fundamental self-deceptions** that tempts us: to look into the “mirror” of God’s word, “*see what he says about us as his own*”, and then forget that and go out to live *in another way* – **i.e.** to embrace the **superficial** view of ourselves in the mirror (as a worthless sinner) and go away living under that *error*
 2. **note my failure to be clear:** the view that a believer *must* see of himself in the mirror is *the view God has of him* – our “temptation” is to *only see the superficial view of ourselves ...*
 - c. (**now**) a **transition statement** that completes the thesis (**vv. 26-27**)
 1. **because:** the concept of *deception* is still very much in play (**i.e.** “*deceives his heart*”, **v. 26**)
 2. or, the key theme of **consistency** is still uppermost in James’ mind here ...
3. the concept of **religion**
 - a. a key word used in this paragraph, repeated three (3) times (**thus the theme of the paragraph**)
 - b. “*religion*” (a:*threskos*:x1, n:*threskeia*:x2) = beliefs and practices in the context of an embrace of supernatural powers; worship practices based on beliefs devoted to a divine being; lit. worship expressed in ritual acts – the connection of practices in life to beliefs held in the supernatural
 1. a word used by (some) people to describe *spirituality* or *lifestyles* (of themselves or others)
 2. a word often used *pejoratively* by modern evangelicals (**i.e.** those who engage in *ritualism*)
 3. **however:** a word that is **rich in meaning**, particularly as it is used in this context
 - a. **e.g.** Calvin considered Christianity to be a *religion*: his “*Institutes of the Christian Religion*” are a theological treatise on what *true Christianity is*; Spurgeon often spoke of Christianity as a *religion*, using the term to address the *distinction between true faith and false faith*
 - b. indeed, *in this context*, **Christianity is a religion**, if we understand (for James) religion to be the *connection of belief to practices*; the connection of *orthodoxy* to *orthopraxy*
 - c. **remember:** the key theme of this letter is **consistency**: a consistency of practice to belief, that genuine saving faith is consistent because it is *lived out faithfully* in all of life
 - d. thus, *if we understand the term correctly*, Christianity is a *true religion* because it demands that those who trust in Christ by faith also *demonstrate* that trust by the way that they live
 1. false religion (then) would either be: a failure to trust in Christ as the only means of righteousness (God’s view of us), *or* a “disconnect” of that trust to the way we live
 - c. **IOW:** how are we to be *properly religious ...* or, how are these **converted Jews** (with a lifetime of ritual practices) to properly behave *as those who have now embraced Jesus as Messiah?*

III. Be Properly Religious (James 1:26-27)

Content

a. bridling the tongue (v. 26)

1. the “*tongue*” = the instrument of *human speech*; the device by which we articulate in language
 - a. **remember:** language (communication) is one of the fundamental aspects of the *Imago Dei*
 1. human beings are the only creatures on this planet that can communicate *complex concepts* to others in language; we are *absorbed* in language (*i.e.* we think in words); language is the basis for many *other aspects* of the *Imago Dei* (*e.g.* relationships); and, language is *complex*, often combined with other means of communication (*e.g.* body language)
 2. but, like every other aspect of the *Imago Dei*, language has been corrupted by the Fall
 - a. we cannot always articulate *perfectly* what we are attempting to communicate
 - b. we do not always *hear* what is being communicated to us
 - c. we often make *assumptions* in what we are saying or hearing that are incorrect
 - d. we sometimes speak in ways that are *harmful* or *hurtful* or *deceitful*
 3. so, although we possess the ability to communicate, our language *sometimes wounds*
 - b. James considers our *speech* to be one of those areas of “*religion*” that needs to be *consistent*
 1. **note:** James will address *in greater detail* the matter of speech in **3:5-8**
2. “*bridle*” = an instrument of *control*; lit. the leather straps placed around the snout of a horse holding both the bit in his mouth and the reins used by the rider; *i.e.* the bridle is a “steering” mechanism
 - a. **e.g.** James will compare the tongue to the rudder of a ship in **3:4** – its steering mechanism
 - b. **here (and 3:2):** bridle is used as a *verb* – to *control* the tongue; to “steer” the content of language
 1. since the content and style of language is *volitional* in nature, James assumes that it is the responsibility of the speaker to communicate *wisely*
 2. **i.e.** to “steer” the tongue so that what comes from it is *consistent* – one of the *foundational* consistencies of true “religion” is to speak in concert with what we believe, *esp. as Christians*
 3. “*but deceives his heart*” = to speak in ways *inconsistent* with the nature of the individual (*i.e.* the heart of the person); to speak in ways that are not fundamentally **Christian in nature**
 - a. **note:** as James writes to Jewish believers, he may be thinking of the tendency within Judaism to consider themselves “more important” than others (by virtue of being the “chosen people”), and speaking in ways that are *condescending* to non-Jews – thus, being inconsistent with being saved by God’s grace in Christ
 - b. **e.g.** to *deny* the person or works of Christ by what you say; to say something that *implies* that you are trusting more in yourself (or luck!) than in the sovereign Lord *or to speak in fear*
 - c. **e.g.** to *fail* to speak in a situation where such speech is required; to fail to speak up when an opportunity for the gospel is presented or *when a Christian worldview is needed*
 - d. **e.g.** to *diminish* another through words; to denigrate another image-bearer because it is *intended* or because *it comes from a heart that has failed to grasp grace*
3. **principle: being properly religious as a true follower of Jesus is to be consistent in your speech – what you believe in your heart about Christ must be utterly consistent with how you speak to others (Colossians 4:6)**

“Let your speech always be *gracious*, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

- a. **when people hear you speak, do they hear the power of Christ in you, or something else?**

b. visiting the vulnerable (v. 27a)

1. “*orphans and widows*” = the most vulnerable group in society (in that age); the downtrodden; those needing the most help from society, but at the mercy of others (*e.g.* **Deut. 10:18; Isa. 1:17; Jer. 7:6**)
 - a. God’s *justice* is often described in relation to these groups (**Deut. 10:18**)
 - b. man’s *injustice* is often described in his failure to help these groups (**Jer. 7:5-7**)
 - c. **e.g.** much of **1 Timothy 5** is dedicated to the relationship of the church to the widows
 1. **IOW:** the most vulnerable members of society (and the church) are the focus here
 2. **interesting:** it is the *elderly widows* that will be the most vulnerable during this pandemic
2. “*pure and undefiled*” = religious practice that is *consistent* with God himself (*i.e.* “*before the Father*”)
 - a. **remember:** James’ point in his *thesis* is that there should be *no “disconnect”* between the nature of a Christian (as a regenerated individual) and his/her actions in time and space
 1. **i.e.** just as God himself (in each Person) acts *utterly consistent* with his nature as God, so we as Christians must act *utterly consistent* with our nature as born-again individuals

- b. since God is a God of *mercy* (by nature), we should be *mercy-focused* in our behaviors toward the truly vulnerable – God often *condemned* the people of Israel for acting *unjustly* toward these very groups *because they should have acted in accordance with what God had done for them*
3. **principle: being properly religious as a true follower of Jesus is to be consistent in your mercy towards the less fortunate – what you believe in your heart about Christ must be utterly consistent with how you relate to the vulnerable (2 Corinthians 9:6-7)**
“The point is this [re: the gift from the Gentile churches to the vulnerable believers in Jerusalem]: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”
- a. **where is the focus of your benevolence, on yourself or with others?**
- c. remaining unstained from the world (v. 27b)**
1. “unstained” = spotless; pure; lit. without blemish (not: unaffected by an epidemic)
- a. James uses the imagery of the sacrificial lamb: the lamb without blemish (Exodus 12:5)
1. **i.e.** his Jewish audience would have recognized this imagery *immediately*
- b. James insists that “*pure and undefiled*” religion is practices that are without blemish
1. actions that are not fundamentally *selfish in purpose* (**i.e.** the core of “false religion”)
2. “*from the world*” = unaffected by the “worldly” ways of thinking that surround the Christian
- a. like Jesus (see John 15:18ff), James *assumes* in this phrase that Christians must be “in” the world – we cannot be “isolated” from living amongst the pagans
- b. however, also like Jesus, James *insists* in this phrase that Christians must be “unaffected” by the thinking patterns of the world itself – **i.e.** we must maintain our worldview without being corrupted
1. **e.g.** can we resist the fear that (currently) grips the world, knowing that God is *sovereign*?
3. **principle: being properly religious as a true follower of Jesus is to be consistent in your view of things in this world – what you believe in your heart about Christ must be utterly consistent with how you understand the world around you (Philippians 3:14-16)**
“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.”
- a. **what affects your thinking more, the Word of God, or the patterns of thought around you?**