

## **Introduction**

How many times have you heard it said, "It is not a religion; it is a relationship"? Perhaps you have heard this one—"Jesus is my Savior not my religion." I read this quote this week: "Jesus is not into religion; He is into love. He is not about rules; He's about relationship—and he wants people everywhere to know Him." Also saw this: "Christianity is not religion; it's a relationship with God through Jesus Christ;" Also, "Jesus did not suffer on the cross so that you could be religious. He wants a loving, committed, intimate, and very personal relationship with you."

Well, this morning I have to tell you that there is a problem with all those statements. I believe that the intentions of those who say these things are good. I may even have said something like them at one time in my life. I do think it is important to emphasize that following Christ is in fact about a relationship. Come and follow me—what is that? I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am there you may be also—what is that but relationship. However, the problem is that such statements which deny that religion has anything to do with following Christ stand opposed to the Bible. They stand diametrically opposed to James, the brother of our Lord, who, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells us in our text this morning that there is such a thing as pure and undefiled religion before God. So how do we properly and biblically handle the mistaken perception that one must choose between relationship and religion? Hmm? We'll consider that and more as we study James 1:19-27 this morning.

[Read Text and Pray]

I want to put us in the context of the whole of James's message. To demonstrate the goodness of God, he shows that while sin brings about death, God brings about life. And it comes through his word. We are brought forth or born by the word of truth to be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. That is, we are set apart to him in a wonderfully peculiar way. And the word by which we are brought forth is also what produces the righteousness of God in our lives by our proper response to it. James's main point in these verses is that there are three components involved in our proper response to God's word. First, we must hear it. Second, we must welcome it. Third, we must do it. The doing of it James calls religion. So let's begin with the first component of a proper response to God's word.

### **I. Hear the Word.**

I am not going to spend much time on this point since we covered it last week. I will say that we must not be hard-hearted toward the word. We must be attentive—quick to hear and slow to speak. We need to let God do the talking through his word, and we must show up to take it in. We must not be so full of our thoughts and ideas that the word has nowhere to lodge within our hearts. We must also guard against anger. The word of God confronts. It pierces deep within our beings exposing the putrid and corrupt reality that is there. Human tendency is to minimize, deny, defend, and deflect or to just become quite angry. We feel justified in protecting ourselves. But what we are doing in the name of protection is preserving the devil's influence on us. The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. What David says in Psalm 139 is the heart beat of one who is quick to hear the word of God: "Search me O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

To hear the word, we must read it for in-depth comprehension. It does us little good merely to let our eyes pass over words on a page. We can move a bookmark forward without hearing the words we have read. What a waste! It is like seeing a jar of honey in the pantry but not even pausing to imagine what it tastes like let alone actually putting it on your tongue. A reading plan is a very good thing. So is the discipline to establish regularity in opening the Bible. But all that can be done without actually hearing what is there. Just as we can silence our tongue, we can silence our raging thoughts. And we must to be single-mindedly attentive to the word of God.

We turn next to the second component of a proper response to God's word.

## **II. Welcome the Word.**

A. Hearing the word is its path into our minds. For the word to be fruitful in us, it needs to go further. It must penetrate into our hearts. Our hearts must welcome the word. James uses the word "receive." He says receive the implanted word. It has the idea of a warm welcome. By use of a similar word, Paul wrote the congregation in Rome commending to them the woman who probably delivered the epistle to them. Her name was Phoebe and Paul urged the church there to RECEIVE her, to welcome her, in a way worthy of the saints. James is saying we first need to hear and then as we hear we need to roll out the red carpet to the word of God. We need to embrace the word and give it a big hug. That is to say God's word is welcome. It is desired. It is hailed as a cherished and permanent settler in our hearts.

B. Now James tells us how to extend such a welcome. When painting, you want good adhesion. So you must properly prepare the surface. The first step is to thoroughly clean it off. When you are planting those spring flowers, you want good pure soil free of invasive competitors. So you remove them. A welcome for the word also involves the removal of certain harmful elements which are incompatible with it. James specifically names filthiness and rampant wickedness. It is clear that he is speaking of moral impurity, ungodliness, unrighteousness. God's word is not compatible with these. They must go if God's word is to be welcome.

The word "rampant" in "rampant wicked" stresses, however, the relentless nature of sin in our lives. Even when we are converted and the Spirit of God comes to dwell with us, the desires of the flesh remain, and they relentlessly set themselves against the Spirit while the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. Those fleshly desires within are what lead to sin. The relentlessness and rampant nature of wickedness within us is not removed by a one-time application of spiritual "Roundup". You know how it goes with weeds. You pull 'em out over here and turn around and they are sprouting up again over there. What James says here indicates that the course of our life in order to keep our hearts a welcome place for God's word is a life of uprooting the weeds of sin so as to keep the ground a place for the flourishing of the implanted word. The bottom line is that we repent when we first come to Christ, but we continue repenting every day of our lives. We must uproot sin and keep uprooting it as it sprouts in order to be a welcome place for the word of God. In other words, if you are harboring sin, you cannot welcome the word.

C. And there is more. For good adhesion, once you clean the surface, you want to apply a good primer. For healthy flowers you follow up the weeding process with a sprinkle of fertilizer and certainly some water in order to extend a warm welcome to your seedlings. Even so, the word is welcomed not only by what we remove but also by how we condition our hearts. What does the trick according to James is meekness. "Receive with meekness the implanted word."

Meekness is among the character qualities Jesus lauds in the sermon on the mount. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Jesus said of himself, "I am meek and lowly in heart." A

meek heart toward the implanted word is what activates its effectiveness for producing the righteousness of God in us. A meek heart is a receptive heart. It is a readiness to be instructed and corrected. It is a readiness to affirm. Meekness is like a ready "Amen" to what the word of God says. Years ago churches I was in regularly sang the hymn, "Wherever he leads I'll go." The title of the hymn reflects a meek spirit to the Lord and his word.

D. Now, there is an important understanding which incentivizes us to receive the word this way. It is what makes the word of God, the implanted word, distinct from every other word. This word, says James, is able to save your soul. No other word can do that! God's word implanted can save. This is its aim—to save you, to save your soul. Again James connects with a saying of Jesus. Remember? Jesus said, "Do not fear those who can kill the body but who cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Here is the gospel, the good news. Every human being due to our sin, our trampling of the law of God, deserves the destruction of body and soul in hell. However, God is not willing that all should perish. Good news! Good news! He sent his son into the world to endure the destruction we deserve so that we could be saved! The implanted word is the word that points us to Christ to repent of sin and to believe in him. It then points us to a salvation active in the present. Through obedience to the word we really live. We are saved from corruption. This word also points us to a future salvation—the eternal deliverance of our souls from the very presence of and even temptation to sin. The word is able to save, but you must respond properly to it. Thus far we are shown that we must hear it and receive it. But there is one more aspect of how we must respond to the word.

### **III. Do the Word.**

James says we must hear the word; we must welcome the word; and now he adds we must execute the word. It is not enough to hear it and welcome it as that which can save your souls. One must also DO the word. The faith that hears and welcomes God's word also obeys the word. It PERFORMS it. By way of explanation, if the word is to be responded to such that one's soul is saved, there is action, implementation, application in the course of living that must flow from hearing and welcoming the word. It must be welcomed to be understood, but a true welcome obeys. When we read, study, memorize, and meditate upon the word, we must also be asking what difference is meant to be made in my living. Are there commands to be obeyed? Principles to be implemented? Examples to be followed? We need to be asking what difference does this make in my thinking and in my doing. Now, James gets quite extensive in this discussion. He urges several actions which relate to the doing of the word.

A. First, he says in effect, "Be warned." Be warned because if you are a hearer of the word and not a doer of the word, you are deceived. You may affirm what the scripture says and you may appear to have high regard for it. You may read it every day. You may be able to explain it to others. You have it in your head. However, if you do not put it into the practice of your life, you are deceiving yourself. You have the appearance of prizing the word, but you in fact demonstrate that you do not hold it dear. That's because if you really treasure God's word, you will do it.

When Jesus told the parable of the soils, there were four kinds—the hard soil, the shallow soil, the infested soil, and the good soil. The seed did not even penetrate the hard soil. The seed easily penetrated the shallow soil, however. Jesus likens this soil to a hearer who has a joyful reception of the word. The hearer is excited. Emotions are strong. Surely this is a genuine lover of the word. You can't help but see it in the emotions. But no. Not so. Challenge sets in and this hearer falls away. Do not let the emotions deceive. There was a third type of soil—the infested soil. The seed

penetrated the soil and it grew. For a time it would seem that this hearer was genuine. The problem was thorns. There were competing interests. In the end the thorns won the day. This hearer did not clear out the filthiness and rampant wickedness. They took over and choked out the word. And as a result there was no fruit, no produce from the word, no doing of the word. Only the fourth soil, called the good soil, yielded fruit. The point of the parable is closely tied to the point James is making here. The word may fall onto your life. You may hear it. You may listen to it. You may welcome it. It may take some root in your life, but be warned. Do not be deceived by your appearing to welcome it. The ultimate question is whether or not it yields fruit, whether it makes a difference, whether there is transformation. So there is a warning. Those who merely hear greatly deceive themselves if they think their hearing means their souls are saved.

We all need this warning. Your reception of the word of God does not mean your soul is saved. It is all or nothing. It is hearing and receiving and doing. No repentance means no redemption. No obedience means no salvation. You remain liable to the wrath of God.

B. Now, second, James says in effect, "Be intent and be steadfast." If you do not want to be deceived about your soul, then what you need to do is to pore over the word intently and perseveringly. The key you see is carefully and perseveringly gazing into God's word. James compares how one looks in the mirror with how one looks into the word. Both may intently study themselves. But one walks away. The one who looks in the mirror eventually puts the mirror down. He forgets. In contrast, the one who DOES the word looks into it intently and perseveringly. He does not stop. He carefully studies himself and perseveres. He does not go away from the word like one goes away from the mirror. He therefore does not forget. He carries through to apply the word to himself addressing the imperfections and those things out of place. He does not just look; he is transformed.

This is the message of Psalm 1. There David describes the doer of the word. His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. Not a little here and a little there . . . but a steadfast stream of meditation. He does not put the mirror down. And he addresses the issues that the mirror of the word reveals. He does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly nor stand in the path of sinners nor sit in the seat of scoffers. He lives according to the word and he yields fruit in its season.

We all need to strive for thinking on God's word day and night, placing our lives before it in order to foster transformation, in order to promote fruit-bearing and the doing of what the word says. We are always meditating. If you are awake you are thinking and that is meditating. Direct your thoughts back to the word intently and steadfastly. And no matter what you are studying, reading, or contemplating, shine the light of the word on your life and order your life accordingly.

C. So James says, "Be warned. Be intent and steadfast." Third, he says, "Be understanding." We need to be understanding of the nature of God's word. He calls it law, the perfect law. He also calls it the law of liberty. But let's start with the concept of law. Law insinuates rules. And rules insinuate religion.

Now, people do not like rules. You and I do not like rules. We admit they are necessary, but we do not like them. No one likes to be told what to do. And it is no different if the law-giver is God. But God IS a law-giver. He has rules and he gives commands. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Honor father and mother. Do not bear false witness. Do not covet. Do not have any gods besides me. Do not make graven images to worship. Do not take the Lord's name in vain.

Jesus himself gives commands and he says, "if you love me keep my commandments." It may well be those who are deceived are ones who want to disconnect their relationship with God from obedience to his law. We need to understand though that denying oneself and taking up one's cross means submitting to the law of Christ and living in obedience to his commands.

And his law is perfect. The law of God is as perfect as is God himself. The God who is and whom followers of Jesus worship is holy, holy, holy. Nothing that comes from him, nothing that he commands is anything less than good. All of his commands coincide with this one, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:1). What we must understand about God's law is that he has applied all that is holy and right and beautiful about his own ethics to the human situation. His law is a reflection of who he is and whom we worship. The law of God matches his character to our nature as human beings made in his image.

And in this way we can grasp that the law God's word delivers is the law of liberty. So long as you are not trying to be right with God on the basis of his law, God's law does not encumber. So long as you are not trying to be right with God on the basis of his law, it does not restrict you from true freedom and joy. John writes (1 John 5:3), "For this is the love of God that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome." God's ethics are freeing. Righteousness is liberating. Sin is weighty. Sin imprisons. Sin burdens. Sin harms. Obedience to the perfect law of liberty sets us free. We need to know that. God's prohibitions do not keep you from anything that could be helpful for you. His obligations are only for your good and for your joy. We need this understanding so that we can refute the flesh which is constantly telling us that rules and laws are confining and joy-sapping. We need to speak this to our souls and believe it with our hearts so that we will be eager to not only hear the word but also to do it.

D. Finally, in addition to being warned, steadfast, and understanding, James tells us to "Be Expectant." The hearer of the word who welcomes the word and does the word is privileged to experience blessing in what he does. The one who looks into the perfect law and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, will be blessed in his doing. We come back to Psalm 1. David says of the one who meditates day and night upon God's law and who does not walk in opposition to it and who is a fruitful tree . . . that he is blessed. And we come back again to Jesus and the sermon on the mount. How many times did he assert that certain folks are blessed? Nine times! The root idea of being blessed is being deeply and richly and satisfyingly happy. Such is the blessing of the doer in his doing. There is joy in obedience because living according to the word is what humans were meant to do. We were made for this!

From time to time I mention one of my favorite films, Chariots of Fire. It is the story of two track athletes from Britain who ran in the 1924 Olympics. One of those was a faithful follower of Christ who went on to be a missionary to China. His name is Eric Liddell. He is known for a number of memorable sayings. One of them is this: "I believe that God made me for a purpose—for China. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure." That's what James is saying here about blessing. God gave us the perfect law of liberty and when we live accordingly, when we are doers of the word, we feel his pleasure, the joy of obedience, and the joy of holiness. The joy of pleasing God is wrapped up in all these layers of joy which come down to doing the word and not merely hearing it.

## **Conclusion**

The people that say it is either religion OR relationship miss what religion is according to the scripture. True religion according to the scripture is not the mere keeping of rules or the obeying of

commands. It is certainly is not the performance of rituals. It is not lighting candles and doing penance. Biblical religion is the outflow of obedience BECAUSE OF the relationship a disciple has with Jesus. He said, "If you love me (relationship), you will keep my commandments (religion)." In James' depiction, children are brought forth in a relationship of sonship to the Father of Lights. And in the context of being his beloved children, within the setting of a father-child relationship, they hang on his every word, hearing, welcoming, and doing what he prescribes. May God our Father give us grace and may we resolve that as his precious children we do just that.