

James - Real Religion

Sign Title: Real Religion

June 19, 2011

Good morning Faith Church! This morning, we are back in the book of James. James is about *practical* religion. It describes what the Christian faith looks like when the rubber meets the road. James is about faith in real life. As a pastor, every week I spend time with people who are hurting. Some are sick, others are lonely, others just wish somebody cared.

How important is compassion for the hurting in the Christian life? Is it just for a gifted few? Is compassion something you show only when convicted by the Holy Spirit? This morning James tells us it is such an important part of the Christian life that you shouldn't be confident you are on your way to heaven without it! That sounds shocking. Let's look at our text and see why James would say this.

James 1:26-27

Last week in VBS, a little girl asked my wife how she could be sure she would go to heaven. What does God require to be saved? If you've been around Faith Church for any length of time, I hope you know the answer. It is placing our faith in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9 (ESV)

Salvation from our sins, a relationship with God, is by faith alone. However, *saving faith is never alone*. It always has byproducts or as Jesus called it in John 15, fruit.

You've probably hear the story of three blind men describing an elephant. The one man felt the legs and described an elephant like a tree. The second blind man felt the belly and described an elephant like a balloon. The third blind man felt the tail and described it like a snake. Which one was right? All of them. Those are three different aspects of the elephant. They are all true. In this passage, James is feeling three different parts of saving faith describing what it looks like in real life. Individually, they are not the whole elephant, but these are part of the evidence of saving faith in our lives.

A tongue that is under control.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. James 1:26 (ESV)

The tongue is one of James' favorite topics. He will talk about it extensively in chapter three and again in chapter 4 so we will have much more to say about our language later in this series.

James describes someone who considers himself religious. The word for religious in the Greek means *outward worship*. This is someone who, on the surface, appears to be spiritually minded. They have all the mechanics of religion down. We would probably describe him as a good church-goer. When the doors are open, he is in church. He carries a Bible. He puts something in the offering. He even helps out as a greeter. If you were to look at this person on the outside of their life, they appear to live *Christianly*.

The second characteristic of this person is that he agrees with others assessment of himself. He looks at his religious life and is impressed. He

believes he is to be admired and assumes that all is good. James says that *he has deceived himself* into thinking all is good. So what is the problem?

His mouth! This man does not keep a tight rein on his tongue. Some of you are horse people and you know James is using an equestrian illustration. He will use the same illustration in chapter 3. A bridle is what controls the bit that goes into the mouth of a horse and allows the rider to keep it under control. If you are on a horse without a bridle, who knows where you will end up. The bridle allows you to reign the horse in. It allows control of a powerful beast. Think of a bridle like a steering wheel and brake pedal for a horse.

James is saying that our tongue is like a horse. When we have been broken by genuine repentance and our hearts have been changed by the miracle of regeneration; the Spirit of God resides within us and he bridles our tongues. Evidence of his presence in our life is he reigns in our language.

The opposite is also true. A church-goer's mouth that is not reigned in gives evidence that the Spirit of God is not in their heart. No matter how many people think I am spiritual, no matter how looked up to I am in church, no matter how spiritually admired I may be by others, if my tongue is not reigned in, it reveals the lack of the Holy Spirit's presence in my heart. Here is how Jesus said it.

The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. Luke 6:45 (ESV)

If you have been around church for a while, you've seen this. Some people are always telling you about how many years they have been part of the

church. When they pray it sounds like they are reading an old King James Bible. They *appear quite spiritual*, but as soon as somebody changes their church, how they process their frustration reveals the true state of their heart.

Soon people begin to expect things aren't quite right. It is hard to put a finger on it but around the church an almost tangible feeling develops. You see, there is gossip, slander and snide comments floating around in the background. Eventually the news gets to the pastor that there are people upset with the changes in the church. As the pastor, when I ask who they are so I can talk to them, the people never share names. Now we are playing a game of hide-n-seek. I am always told they are important people in the church, pillars of the church, big givers in the church and because of the change they are holding back their giving. Yet, nobody will tell me who they are. Do you see primitive attempts at control and manipulation?

Then it comes time for a church meeting and even though I didn't see it coming, everything hits the fan. In a public forum, Mr. or Mrs. Grumpy pants lets their venom fly and everybody's hair gets set on edge. As a pastor I say, "Wow!, where did that come from?"

What happened? Their religion was just a cover up. It was a show. When they were put under pressure their true heart was revealed. It showed that the Holy Spirit was not bridling the tongue. It showed lack of genuine saving faith on the inside.

Do we all say things we regret? Of course! But a defining quality of the spirit of God in the life of a believer is a mouth that has been reigned in and is under control.

We have often heard of situations where someone finds out that such and such goes to a particular church and there is a gasp. He goes there? Why? I would never have known that by the way they talk!

Even worse is what I call *death by a thousand cuts*. It is the wagging tongues that destroy a church from within as people whisper slander and accusation and subtly suggest something that they heard about someone. *They talk about people rather than to people*, yet on Sunday morning they sing with their mouth as wide open as a garbage can lid and they take notes like they are going out of style. Yet they go home and talk *about people rather than to people* with their problems. James says, I don't care how good you are at playing the game, if you don't keep your tongue under control, you have not assurance that you are anything more than a big spiritual fake. If Christ hasn't reigned in your tongue, it is because he isn't in your heart. That is a guaranteed first priority when he takes up residence in a life.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.
Ephesians 4:29 (ESV)

Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. Ephesians 5:4 (ESV)

Does this mean we will never say anything wrong? Of course not. In James 3:2, James says we will all stumble in what we say. We need to be quick to repent and quick to seek forgiveness from the ones we wound with our mouth.

While we will always say things we regret and need to repent of, if the Holy Spirit is in our heart, there will be evidence that our mouth has been bridled. We seek repentance when it runs out of control.

A heart of compassion for the helpless.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,... James 1:27 (ESV)

Almost as if to contrast the out of control venomous tongue, James gives the second byproduct of genuine faith, or *real religion* as he calls it. It is to look after orphans and widows in their distress. Instead of being a sign of what we *don't do*, it is a sign of what Christians *will do*. Remember, this is only part of the elephant. It is not all of the elephant. I don't want anyone rushing out of here thinking that if they haven't adopted an orphan they can not go to heaven. Though adopting an orphan from the orphanage we are supporting in India would be a great place to start applying this text. What James is saying is that if I am aware of an orphan in need and I feel no empathy for him, then my religion is a fake.

Why would my response to a needy child be an indicator of the reality of my faith? What about a widow? Let's examine widowhood first.

Widowhood in the first century was different than widowhood in the U.S. today. Widows, particularly those without children, had no means of support. There were not government agencies. There were few if any ministries to them. They relied on begging for their food. They were *totally helpless*. They relied on God moving the hearts of those who passed by to throw a few coins their way to meet their needs.

This is what made the story of the widows mite so incredibly powerful. She put in all she had to live on. God would literally have to provide the next piece of food for her mouth because she had *nothing* to fall back on. That is living by faith. That is generous giving.

Giving money to an old widow on the street was considered a waste of giving. It was perpetuating a life that would soon end anyway. There was no future for a widow.

What about orphans? They were in the same situation. They were helpless. They had no parents to meet their needs. No government agencies to look after them or help. As children, they had little ability to meet their own needs and little wisdom to protect them from those who wanted to take advantage of them. As street children, their understanding of life and their sense of right and wrong was bent from the earliest of days. Once again another bad, investment of your charitable gifts because there was no future for them.

So why are widows and orphans singled out as the litmus test for the test of true faith in a Christians' life? Ministry to them is pure and faultless because *they have nothing material to give back to us in return*. When we seek to help them, it has to flow from a heart that loves others the way God loves us.

When God loved us in Christ, what did God gain from loving us? What need did God have that by loving us, we could meet for him? Absolutely nothing. We have nothing to offer God. God has no needs we can meet. Why did he love us? He loved us because just as real and powerful as God's wrath against sin is his completely underserved and lavish love. By loving us, when we were so

unlovable, the glory of God's love is displayed in all its true beauty. Spiritually, we are the widows. We are the orphans. And God loved us.

If true saving faith is part of our life, we will have joy expressing the same kind of love for others that God expressed toward us. We will have joy loving the unlovable just as God loves us, the unlovable and hopeless. So saving faith creates *the type of love that God has for us, in us*. When we have experienced that love, we want to express it to others, especially those who are in desperate and hopeless situations, just like we were before Jesus.

Jesus hammers this same point home.

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Luke 14:12–14 (ESV)

As many of you know, we are working on ways to better reach our region with the good news of Jesus Christ. As part of this, we are looking at satellite locations for Faith Church. Before we do that, one of the most important things we can do is simply put our religion into practice by being a church full of people who love those that can not love us back. Let me give you some examples.

Do your kids have friends in the neighborhood that you can invite to church on Sunday? You can even offer to pick them up Sunday morning and bring them? I know some of you are thinking that would ruin your family time. You are probably right. Real religion is loving those who can not love us back.

How about the pregnancy care center? There are many unwed mothers and children in the womb who need our help. Those mothers and children will never be able to love you back. Real religion is loving those who can not love us.

Have you made a decision about adopting an orphan or a pastor in India where we are helping plant a church? That is real religion. Loving those who can never return love to you.

What about the elderly? We have an increasing number in the church. Putting our religion into practice means making time to love those who can not love us in return. Perhaps it is being part of the simple repair team and taking time to do those simple repairs for the elderly.

What about foster children? I know some of you have taken foster children into your home. I applaud you. That is real religion.

If someone was to itemize your life, what have you done this past year that involves practical acts of love for those who have absolutely nothing to offer you in return? That is the evidence of true saving faith. If completely unmerited love is not part of our life, is saving faith part of our heart?

A Mind of Purity

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: ...to keep oneself unstained from the world. James 1:27 (ESV)

It should be obvious but no matter how spiritual you claim to be, if your faith is not creating increasing moral purity in your life, then it is fake faith. Does this means we must be perfect? No. It means the passion of our life is in the direction of purity, it is for purity. If there is no trend towards increasing moral purity, if there is no hunger for holiness, faith is a fake.

What does a life unstained by the world look like? Some people think it means to extract ourselves from the world and create a separate sub-culture. As some of you know I am from the East coast and worked as a youth pastor in a Mennonite Church. There were Amish and old order Mennonites around us. Their version of keeping oneself unstained by the world was to only dress in black, use buttons instead of zippers. They plowed with a horse not a tractor. Their understanding of being unstained by the world was living in a separate world. You may laugh but we are not much different. We often limit our friends to just church folks and we separate ourselves from others. That is not what James is talking about. Jesus was spending his time with the tax collectors and sinners. James is talking about our values, our desires, the way we live in the world.

For example, many people think the ultimate vacation is sitting on the beach in the Bahamas. Nothing wrong with that but when the Holy Spirit comes in your heart he brings a new value system. There is joy restoring the home of a poverty stricken woman who lost her place to live after a hurricane. That is a greater vacation joy than the Bahamas because a new value system is in our heart through the Holy Spirit.

Teenager, many of you are making money at your jobs. A number of you are dreaming about buying the new iPod. Nothing wrong with the new iPod. But the Holy Spirit in your heart will give you a new value system. There will be greater joy in taking some of your income and using it to support an orphan in India with food and so they hear the gospel with part of your income than there

will be with the iPod. The presence of God in your heart has brought a new value system into your life and given you a capacity to a new great joy.

Conclusion

How are we saved? By faith alone. But saving faith is never alone. There are three practical ways it always manifests itself. Control of our tongue, love for others, especially those who could never return love to us, and a passion for purity from the values of the world, not extraction from living in the world. That is what real religion looks like. Faith Church, this week lets live our faith.



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