

SERIES: Walk the Talk

SERMON: **When Religion Is Worthless (or I Believe in Christian Living)**

SCRIPTURE: James 1:19-27

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DATE: June 15, 2008

I have given two titles to my sermon today. The first is *When Religion Is Worthless*. The second is *I Believe in Christian Living*. I want to explain where the second comes from. As you will recall, we did a two-month series in April and May on our proposed new EFCA Statement of Faith, called *This We Believe*. I took the eight major topics of our Creed and preached a series of messages on those topics. The series included,

*I Believe in God the Father*

*I Believe in the Bible*

*I Believe in Mankind, God's Highest Creation, Yet Fallen*

*I Believe in Jesus Christ*

*I Believe in Salvation*

*I Believe in the Holy Spirit*

*I Believe in the Church*

*I Believe in the Future*

But I left out one of the articles in our new Statement of Faith, one that was not found at all in our original Statement of Faith. It breaks new ground for us and generated quite a lot of debate among our Ministerial Association—the same kind of debate the Book of James has always stirred up—that between faith and works. In ten days this new Statement of Faith will be voted upon at the National Leadership Conference in St. Louis. Here is Article 8:

*Christian Living*

*We believe that God's justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose. God commands us to love Him supremely and others sacrificially, and to live out our faith with care for one another, compassion toward the poor and justice for the oppressed. With God's Word, the Spirit's power and fervent prayer in Christ's name, we are to combat the spiritual forces of evil. In obedience to Christ's commission, we are to make disciples among all people, always bearing witness to the gospel in word and deed.*

There are two reasons I left Article 8 out of the previous series. One is timing. I didn't have time for a ninth sermon in that series if we were going to start this series on the Book of James the first Sunday of June, which is when our Children's Ministry was starting it. The second reason I passed on it is because I knew there was a perfect passage here in James to serve as the foundation for Article 8.

This morning I'm not going to deal with everything in Article 8, but I will say this: the thrust of it is that Christians must not tolerate divorce. I'm not thinking of the divorce of a husband and wife (that too, of course, is addressed pointedly in Scripture), but I'm talking about the divorce of faith and practice.<sup>1</sup> The failure to behave like we believe is the worst kind of divorce among the ranks of Christians. That's why we named this whole series, *Walk the Talk*. James, more than any other biblical writer, stresses the tragedy of this kind of divorce. Notice some of the phrases in Article 8 that speak to this:

*must not be separated,*

*live out our faith,  
word and deed.*

More than a half century ago A. W. Tozer wrote these convicting words:

*There is an evil which I have seen under the sun. . . . It is the glaring disparity between theology and practice among professing Christians.*

*So wide is the gulf that separates theory from practice in the church that an inquiring stranger who chanced upon both would scarcely dream that there was any relation between them. An intelligent observer of our human scene who heard the Sunday morning sermon and later watched the Sunday afternoon conduct of those who had heard it would conclude that he had been examining two distinct and contrary religions. . . .*

*It appears that too many Christians want to enjoy the thrill of feeling right but are not willing to endure the inconveniences of being right.<sup>ii</sup>*

I wonder what Tozer would think if he were to come back today and see how much the Christian culture has changed since 1955, and not for the better.

With those thoughts in mind let's read James 1:19-27:

*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 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.*

*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 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. 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.*

*If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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.*

I want to pick up on that phrase in verse 26, "his religion is worthless" and the following phrase, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this," and build our study around these two concepts. Many evangelicals today view "religion" is a pejorative term, suggesting that Christianity is not a religion but a relationship. This is an effort to distinguish the Christian faith from the empty ritualism that seems to characterize so much organized religion today.

But James is unwilling to surrender the good term "religion" just because it is misused by some. He acknowledges that religion can be worthless, but he also claims it can be pure and faultless in God's eyes. The passage lays out for us some key factors that determine whether our religion is worthless or valuable.

## **Religion is worthless when we fail to humbly accept God's Word. (19-21)**

Please pay attention to how James opens this section: "My dear brothers, take note of this." This tells us, first, that he is talking to believers, his brothers in Christ, and second, he is trying to focus their attention on something very important. His primary concern is expressed in the phrase, "humbly accept the word planted in you," the same word of truth through which we are born again, according to verse 18. He's talking about the Scriptures. James offers four prerequisites for this to happen: a listening ear, a controlled mouth, a calm spirit, and a clean heart.

### **Prerequisites for accepting the Word:**

**1. A listening ear: *Be quick to listen.*** Listening was very important in the first century, because books were rare, especially written Scriptures. It was an oral culture, and those not disciplined in listening ran the risk of missing out on spiritual truth. I suggest we are again quickly becoming an oral and visual culture, and so we need these instructions as much as his first-century listeners. In urging us to be good listeners James is suggesting we need to soak up truth and to be teachable. Very closely related to being a good listener is the second prerequisite:

**2. A controlled mouth: *Be slow to speak.*** You can't be a good listener if you're talking all the time. One of the best church leaders I ever worked with was a man named George Andrews, a dear friend of Faye Netherton. He was a very quiet man, not your Type-A kind of leader, but he was owner of a successful company, president of the school board in St. Louis, and chairman of our Elder Board for a number of years. The thing that was most often said about George was that "he doesn't say much, but when he does, it's always worth hearing." George was living out the truth taught in so many of the Proverbs.

Proverbs 10:19: "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise."

Proverbs 17:28: "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue."

Proverbs 29:20: "Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him."<sup>iii</sup>

**3. A calm spirit: *Be slow to become angry.*** Anger is a complex topic in Scripture. It is a very natural emotion, and clearly it is not always evil. We are all familiar with what we call righteous indignation, and we are aware that anger is a great motivating factor in correcting injustice. That's why it is important to note the specific kind of anger James is denouncing here: he calls it "man's anger" (as opposed to God's anger or righteous indignation). "Man's anger," he says, "does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."

**4. A clean heart: *Get rid of all moral filth and evil.*** I fear that the principal reason many Christians do not welcome the Word of God, do not read it, and do not study it is that their lives are too compromised by moral filth and evil—from TV, movies, the internet, unhealthy relationships, etc. One simply cannot find joy and satisfaction in the Word of God if it is always

speaking conviction to one's lifestyle. It can't happen!

As a matter of fact, I have long thought that most people who claim to have intellectual problems with the Bible don't have any such thing. They have moral problems with it. If you knew what was going on in their lives you would realize quickly that their beliefs and their behavior just couldn't co-exist, so they jettisoned their beliefs and continued their behavior. James, of course, challenges us to do the opposite—get rid of moral filth and evil and continue to believe the Word of Truth. But it has to be one or the other.

Now I have presented these four factors (a listening ear, a controlled mouth, a calm spirit, and a clean heart) as prerequisites for accepting God's Word. James now offers a wonderful motive for going this direction:

**The benefit of accepting the Word: it can save you.** “Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” It's a life or death issue. The Word of God is His instrument of salvation—ultimately the Living Word, Jesus Christ, but He can't be separated from the Written Word, because that's how we know Him. 1 Peter 1:23 says, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” James is simply saying that a true acceptance and welcoming of God's Word must be accompanied by a listening ear, a controlled mouth, a calm spirit, and a clean heart, and if these things are not observable in our lives, that is evidence that we have not humbly accepted the Word of God and may not even be saved.<sup>iv</sup>

So our first point is that religion is worthless when we fail to accept God's Word. But James goes further:

### **Religion is worthless when we fail to *do* God's Word. (22-25)**

Far too many Christians delude themselves into thinking that they have accepted God's Word just because they listen to sermons, attend Bible studies, or even memorize Scripture. In fact, I think this deception is particularly dangerous in conservative, Bible-teaching churches. John MacArthur writes,

*“When people are blessed with regular, in-depth preaching and teaching of Scripture (as they certainly are under MacArthur's ministry), they may become so enamored with their knowledge of God's Word that they become self-satisfied with that knowledge and forsake the effort to live out the profound truths they have come to understand.”*<sup>v</sup>

Friends, true acceptance is only proved by doing what we claim to accept.

**The one who *merely* listens to the Word deceives himself.** Verse 22: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.” Listening is important, in fact, it is crucial, but the emphasis here seems to be on “merely.” The *mere* listener reminds me of one who audits a college class. He attends and presumably listens, but he pays a lot less and he is not required to do outside study, write papers, or take tests. In other words, he is not held accountable for what

he hears. It costs him a lot less, but he gets a lot less out of it. Tragically, many church pews are filled with auditors on any given Sunday.

If all we do is audit, or listen, then we are self-deceived. An old Scottish expression calls such people “sermon tasters who have never tasted the grace of God.” We must *do* what God says. Obedience is the proof of our salvation. Note I don’t say that our obedience saves us, but it is the evidence of our salvation. If we don’t do what we hear, James suggests, we are like the proverbial man in the mirror. This man glances at himself, notices that his hair is a mess, he still has shaving cream on his sideburns, his nose hairs are an inch long, but as soon as he looks away he forgets what he looks like and goes on about his business.

The metaphor suggests that Scripture is a mirror to our souls. It reveals our sin and calls for repentance. The one who sees his sin for the horrible evil it is and sees God’s grace in Christ for the wonderful provision it is, and yet continues to live in his sin is deceived. The word can also mean defrauded. He defrauds himself, because he misses the opportunity to grow into maturity and to find the fulfillment and success that is available only through obedience to the Word of God. Joshua told the people of Israel, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8).

There is another option, of course, besides glancing at the mirror and forgetting. One can look intently at the mirror of Scripture and continue to look until one does something about what he sees, and James praises the one who does so. Look at verse 25: “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.”

**The one who listens *and does* what it says will be blessed.** I’m fascinated by the description of the Word of God here—“the perfect law that gives freedom.” It is perfect because it is inerrant, sufficient, and authoritative. But think about the rest of the phrase. Doesn’t it sound like an oxymoron—the law that gives freedom. Aren’t laws designed to take away freedom? Traffic laws limit your speed. Tax laws limit what you do with your money. Home owner’s associations limit what you can do with your property. In what sense does the law give freedom?

Well, while limiting your speed, traffic laws give you the freedom to arrive alive. While limiting your income tax laws provide the roads to drive on and the police who enable you to live safely, thereby increasing your freedom. While limiting what you do with your own property, homeowner’s associations grant you freedom from having some neighbor destroy your property value by painting his house chartreuse or parking six old cars in the driveway.

Now that’s true of imperfect human laws. The perfect law of God is even more freedom-oriented. When God tells us not to steal, He is protecting the freedom of our consciences and our physical freedom, which will surely be taken away if we’re caught. When He commands us to observe the sabbath, He is protecting our freedom from overwork and secularization of life. When God’s law forbids false witness He is trying to grant freedom to society. When we know

someone's word is reliable, it frees us from oaths, contracts, and other human conventions designed to constrain people to do what they say.

The result of accepting the Word and living by it is that the person who does so "will be blessed in what he does." Real blessing and real happiness, lies in doing God's will. Jesus Himself said so. When a person in the crowd called out to him, "Holy Mary, Mother of God . . ." (Their actual words were, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you"), He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:28).

Now so far we have seen that religion is worthless when we fail to humbly accept God's Word or when we fail to do God's Word.

### **Religion is worthless when we fail to control our tongues. (26)**

Let's read again verse 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." This is the second time James has addressed the tongue in this chapter, and he's going to offer a major treatise on it in chapter 3, which Josh will be preaching the first Sunday in July. Here's how I have chosen to express this concept:

**"Religious" and "mouthy" are contradictory terms.** The tongue is not the only indicator of worthless faith, but it perhaps the most reliable. It has been estimated that the average person speaks some 18,000 words a day, enough to fill up sixty-six 800-page volumes a year! And I know some people who are way above average! If the tongue is not controlled by God it is a sure indicator that the heart is not either. A corrupt and unholy heart will eventually be exposed by corrupt and unholy speech.

We've seen some startling examples of inappropriate speech by religious leaders in the past several months, particularly Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Michael Pfleger, the Catholic priest who was a recent guest in his pulpit. John Hagee and Rod Parsley have also been much in the news for over-the-top pronouncements on various topics. But this is not a fault reserved to clergy. James says, "If *anyone* considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."

**The one who doesn't exercise control of the tongue deceives himself.** This is the second time self-deceit has been mentioned in our passage. You know, it's bad enough to be a deceiver of others, but if possible, I think self-deception is even worse. The deceiver knows what he's doing and so, if he comes under conviction, he can conceivably change his mind and stop doing it. But the self-deceived are almost hopeless. Their whole perspective is distorted. They are not in touch with reality. I saw a documentary on Dennis Rader recently, and if ever a person was self-deceived, it is he. He moaned about how his darkest day was when a reported failed to show up in jail to interview him. Preposterous!

May I call your attention to this phrase James uses about the religion of the person who says

whatever he wants whenever he wants and exercises no control of his tongue: it is worthless. It's not weak religion, it's not inadequate religion, it's worthless. It doesn't do him, or anyone else, one iota of good.

So far the news about religion has been pretty bad.

**On the other hand, religion is pure and faultless when . . . (27)**

**We look after orphans and widows in distress.**

**We keep ourselves from being polluted by the world.**

James isn't talking about religion that seems good to us, or to the world, but the kind that "God our Father accepts." After all, His opinion is the only one that really counts. We evangelicals tend to rate people's spirituality based on their prayers, church attendance, giving, and willingness to serve. These factors are not necessarily irrelevant, but neither are they sufficient. Our religion is pure and blameless, according to James, when two things are true:

**We look after orphans and widows in distress.** I believe orphans and widows are mentioned as representatives of a class of people—those who can't readily take care of themselves, the defenseless members of society. While many exploit the defenseless, God protects them. The church used to shine in this arena. Most of the great hospitals in our country were started by Christian denominations. Orphanages were almost entirely the province of the church. Soup kitchens and rescue missions were always faith-based. But things have changed over the years. As more and more people have looked to the government to solve social problems, the church has backed off, or in some cases been pushed out. The results have not been entirely positive. The government can certainly provide resources but it cannot show love. It can provide care for our bodies but not care for our spirits.

If you're like me you know you have an obligation to obey this command to look after orphans and widows and others who are defenseless. But how? Well, there are many ways. There are scores of shut-ins in our own church family. I am so proud of those in our congregation who make regular visits to these elderly. I am proud of the women who provide ministry to Special Needs children so their parents can attend worship. I am proud of the individuals who serve at Jackson Elementary School as lunch buddies to children whose families are disasters. I want to show you a short video I came across on Wednesday that speaks to the issue of orphans. We don't have many orphanages in our own country, but the need is huge overseas.

If you want to take one small step toward fulfilling this Scripture passage, you can go to [globalfingerprints.org](http://globalfingerprints.org) and sign up. Finally, if we want our religion to be pure and faultless, . . .

**We keep ourselves from being polluted by the world.** Fascinating, isn't it, that James puts this right next to looking after orphans and widows as evidence of pure religion? I think the reason is that it is so easy for us to divorce religion from morality. Dennis Rader's stunning ability to serve as the president of his local church while he was raping, torturing and murdering

innocent people is only different in degree, not in kind from the hypocrisy we all demonstrate when we come to church with a pious smile on our face and perhaps even teach a Sunday School class, while we ignore sinful behavior in our lives that would bring shame on the name of Christ if known.<sup>vi</sup>

**Conclusion:** I want to ask you this morning, have you been guilty of divorce? I'm not thinking of a broken marriage at this point, but rather of the separation of doctrine from duty, of belief from behavior, of creed from conduct, of precept from practice?

Friends, religious talk is as cheap as religious ritual.<sup>vii</sup> What impresses James is devotion to God that manifests itself in concrete acts of love and righteousness. I'm not talking about perfection. It is not our perfection that proves our salvation but rather the hating of our imperfections, the acceptance of God's forgiveness in Christ, and the seeking, with the Holy Spirit's help and power, to correct them.

Have you been *born again* by the Word of Truth?  
 Have you *humbly accepted* the Word of Truth?  
 Are you *doing* the Word of Truth?

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i. Charles Swindoll calls this section of James, *The Great Divorce* in his Bible study guide, *James: Practical and authentic Living*.

ii. A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*, 51-53.

iii. When a famous Roman orator was asked by a young man to teach him the art of public speaking, the young man continued an incessant flow of meaningless talk that allowed the great teacher no opportunity to interject a word. When they finally reached the point of discussing a fee, the orator said, "Young man, to instruct you in oratory, I will have to charge you a double fee." When asked why, he explained, "Because I will have to teach you two skills: the first, how to hold your tongue; the second, how to use it." Cited in John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, James*, 71.

iv. It's important that we think for a moment about which comes first—accepting the Word or salvation. It's possible to interpret James' words as suggesting that you have to first get your house in order and then salvation is possible. But the uniform teaching of Scripture is that we must be regenerated by God's Spirit before we even have the power to clean house. Even here, please notice, our new birth is mentioned in verse 18 before anything is said about these factors. I am personally inclined to think that James is not trying to establish a chronology here, so "prerequisites" may be the wrong term to describe the listening ear, the controlled mouth, the calm spirit, and the clean heart.

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v. John MacArthur, 79-80.

vi. James agrees with the biblical teaching that we are to be in the world but not of it. The world is a system of thought, of values, of perspectives that often contradict God's. James says later, "Friendship with the world is hatred toward God. Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4). What is our friendship quotient with the world? Are we more like Demas or Moses? Demas abandoned the faith, "having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10). Moses, on the other hand, "chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time." (Hebrews 11:25).

vii. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Cor. 7 that "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts." In Galatians 6:15 he put it a little differently but the meaning is the same: "What counts is a new creation." James agrees.