

True Religion

James 1: 19-27

The over-arching theme of the epistle of James is how to go about living our faith in such a way that it promotes growth and spiritual maturity. Today's passage has to do with how we handle anger -- in particular the temptation to give over to that emotion. Uncontrolled anger and an unbridled tongue reveal the true state of our heart. When we give in to anger it affects not only those around us, but it also stifles spiritual growth and jeopardizes our testimony before others.



Read James 1:19-27

*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;
20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.
21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness,
and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. (v. 19-21¹)*

The one who is listening naturally comes more slowly to anger than the one forcing his side of the argument. Anger blocks the growing and maturing of faith which is the overreaching theme of James' epistle. Our anger does not allow us to respond in a way that brings about the righteous life God desires for us. The anger of which James speaks is the selfish, self-serving, self-righteous anger of one who is does not get his way, or perceives an insult or injury from the other party wounding his pride, bruising his ego. It is this self centered mindset that blocks the movement of the spirit within our souls. This is not the righteous anger in response to sin or injustice. Only God can respond in righteous anger on behalf of the righteous in a manner that does not lead to sin. James is talking about human anger rooted in human pride and self-centeredness. It causes us to focus on ourselves and leads to reactions that cause harm not healing in a broken relationship. It blocks mercy and does not allow for peacemaking. God's way always leads to healing and redemption. Human anger left unchecked leads to sin: revenge, hatred, and harm. This focus on getting even, or having the last word, or proving that you are right at any cost slams shut the door on the Holy Spirit residing in our hearts.

James tells us to turn away from "all sordidness" or "moral filth": The self centered and selfish response that our heart desires when we've given ourselves over to anger. He says "get rid of it", in fact he says "cast it aside, throw away moral filth" like a soiled and putrid garment after we've had our roll in the muck of worldly vices and behaviors. We are not like the world; we ought not to respond like the world. We are to cast off the worldly and sordid filth that has left its stains upon us. Along with casting of the moral filth we are to cast of the evil excesses. The NRSV calls

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this “rank growth of wickedness”. It is the sin in our lives in which we still indulge as children of God. We must cast it off, repent of it so that we may stand in righteousness before the Lord. The evil excesses are all the things we fill our hearts with, growing and expanding to the point that the Word (the truth, the Holy Spirit) becomes crowded and cannot grow. Perhaps the prevalent evil in this circumstance of anger is malice, the desire to do harm or get even, hold a grudge and fail to forgive.

When we cast off moral filth and repent of evil, humbly acknowledging and confessing our sin, God who is eager to forgive us will dress us in robes of righteousness and our humbled hearts are soil ready to receive and accept the word planted in us, the word that saves. But we must have a humble heart devoid of pride, moral filth and evil for the word to accomplish its work. The Word planted in us is already resident. It was planted upon conversion. But each time we react in anger we block its movement. What is the Word? It is what John says in John 1:1, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”* and in verses 4-5 *“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness.”* That Word is Truth; the love, grace and mercy of Jesus; it is the presence of the Holy Spirit guiding and counseling us along the way. This is what we block when we give into human anger.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act –they will be blessed in their doing. (v. 22-25)

So what are we to do with that word planted in us? According to James, we are not merely to listen to and so be deceived, but we are to do what the word says. Hearing the word, knowing the word is not enough. We must respond and act upon the word. How many times have we come to mass, heard the homily or sermon, and thought – “Wow, great message” and walked out of the church having received the word, but not acted upon it? We’ve heard it but it changes nothing in our actions. The deception mentioned here is from the Greek *paralogizomai* which means “to cheat or deceive by false reasoning”.² The deception is the thinking that hearing the truth is enough. Actually, it is only the beginning. After the hearing, is the thinking, the pondering, the taking to heart of the truth and allowing it to change one’s thought processes and results in action or changed behavior.

James gives us the image of a man who looks at himself in the mirror, and forgets what he looks like. He doesn’t see any flaw or attribute about himself that needs fixing. He goes on his way, confident in that fact that he is a new creation by faith and that is enough. The mirror is the Word, or as in verse 25 it is described as the “perfect law that gives freedom”. The Law as received by Moses, while it does not save us, it points out our failings, our transgressions, mistakes

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and flaws. It is the mirror that shows the error of our ways so that we may repent and change our ways.

Notice how the “looking” in the mirror or the law is described in each verse. In verse 23 the man doesn’t seem to look or peer closely. He sees his reflection, to him everything looks good, and he goes on his way. In verse 24, notice the adjective that follows the “looking”. It says he looks “intently” in the NIV. It says, *“But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom”*. This man is intently examining, studying his reflection in the law. The word here is *parakypas* which literally means “to stoop down” in order to have a good close look.³ He is looking closely at how he measures up, what he needs to change or improve. It goes on to say in this verse, *“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”*. He doesn’t do this just once, he does it continually, the NRSV says he “perseveres” in this endeavor. He continually hears the word and reflects on the law and examines himself. He is not just a hearer of the Word, but a doer. He does what the Word says.

Before we move on let’s take a some time to examine the phrase “the perfect law that gives freedom”. This concept appears paradoxical. We know that the Law cannot save us, and Paul called it a burden or yoke that not even the Jews could uphold. How is it that this law of perfection can liberate? Well, we have to look at it the context of its time. The perfect law, is the law that perfects. It works to an end of perfecting the one who is examining himself in its reflection. The word “perfect” that we encounter here is that same Greek word “teleios” we’ve been learning about this week. The law reveals our failings. Our examination of ourselves, our desire to receive the truth, the Word, and change ourselves in the light of what we discover about ourselves is the perfecting work through the law. While the law does not save us, it reveals our failings and shows us where to turn in repentance. The freedom we gain from the law is the freedom that comes in Jesus’ saving work on the cross and our salvation by faith in that work. We have freedom from the condemnation of sin, and the resulting eternal death. And we have the freedom to walk the path of abundant life in Christ here and now. The law now can save as it works in conjunction with the saving work of Christ on the Cross.

Going back to the last phrase of James 1:25: *“he will be blessed in what he does.”* Follows closely the words of Jesus in Luke 11:28, *“Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it”*. The blessing comes both in the “doing” as a result of his careful self-examination, as well as the good work he will do based on hearing the word of God, in particular when it comes to the directive of verse 27: the looking after of the poor, oppressed and down-trodden. More about this verse later. The blessing of God is the living in the union of truth and action, which is their joy. As we saw in our homework, the blessings come in the walking the path of life with Christ. In doing, as well as, hearing the truth implanted in us. The work we do to care for the less fortunate is part of that path and comes from doing what the Word says. The blessing is in the work we do and the blessed gifts of the Father of heavenly lights.

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If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (v. 26-27)

These last verses are an admonition against boasting about our faith. Our words should match our walk. We can act and sound as pious as a saint, but if it doesn't come sincerely from our hearts and match our actions, it is a façade – it is false, empty and most of all a deception.

How many of us compromise our testimony as a child of God when we open our mouths? What comes off our tongue originates from our heart, revealing how much we esteem our God and our faith/religion. If what comes off our tongue does not resonate with the religion that God accepts, then we have no religion, we are deceived. The religion that God accepts as pure and faultless cares for the least among us and is undefiled by the world. It is a deception not only to others who look to us as a model of faith, but more importantly it is a self deception, a delusion that we fall under, we deceive ourselves, says James. We think ourselves pious and full of faith because we speak and act the part while in reality we have deprived ourselves of a true relationship with the Lord. James tells us in verse 27 that true religion is:

1. **Pure and faultless** – it strives to live in holiness and according to the law; keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world in which we live and serve. Our faith is meaningless if we roll in the muck of sin and are indistinguishable from the world around us. We must strive to live up to God's standard, not the world's standard of relativity. All sin is sin, there are not degrees of sin. Whether we steal or murder – both place us in the same state of sin.
2. **serves** those less fortunate rather than ourselves, in particular the orphans and widows – these constitute the poorest of the poor in James' day. They had no one to help them and were often oppressed and neglected. Unless they were supported by a family member, they were often forced into begging, slavery, prostitution, homelessness, and starvation. When we serve those we have no hope of gaining anything from, it shows we know what it means to love and serve with compassion and mercy – with a heart like Christ's.

These two elements reveal true religion according to James. True religion puts right living ahead of religious ritual. According to the Bible Knowledge Commentary, "This is not a definition of religion but rather a contrast to mere acts of worship and ritualistic observances that are commonly called "religion." Again, the goal is a mature Christian walk and practical holiness." One who is grounded in God's word, who allows that implanted word to flourish, will withstand the trials and temptations that come their way. They will stand undefiled by the world. Through their actions in serving the poor and clinging to the Word, their Christian walk is perfected and they live in practical holiness.