

Roy's Sermon for March 5, 2023

James 1:26-27 Religion That God Accepts As Pure

Last week's text was James 1:21-25, in a sermon I entitled 'It's All Done With Mirrors'. We continued to see that true Christianity is about responding to God's "Word of truth." And we saw that James begins v21 with that all important link word "therefore." Or in other words, *this is how I want you to respond to those previous things of which I have just spoken; here is your practical application.* "Get rid of all moral filth that is so prevalent."

I explained that he speaks as if we are in the process of already doing this while yet again referring back to v18, that such an action is an evidence of this "birth" that we have "received through the word of truth!" Verse 25 is the key to these things: "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." We saw that the Greek word in v21 "*perissein*" meaning *superfluous, leftover, excesses, or bits remaining*. In the same way, when Jesus' disciples went around and "picked up 7 baskets full of leftover pieces" when He fed the 4000, these were excesses, they were not needed. As are such things of "moral filth" which can cling to us from our old life! Yes moral filth."

The Greek word used is "*Hurarpian*." Which when applied medically means a build-up of wax in the ears. Because that's what clinging to such things does to us: Blocks our spiritual ears and makes us deaf to the Word of God! v22 "Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves, do what it says." So coming to worship as a purely intellectual exercise or mere curiosity is an act of self-deception. True Christianity is about "hearing and doing." And yet we are not saved by what we do. We are saved For what we do! v23-24, only hearing God's Word and not responding to it, is like "looking into a mirror" as we brush our teeth and then race out the door. And we can't remember if we washed our face, combed our hair or wiped the toothpaste from our face! Yes God's Word is that "mirror" into which we look. In it we see Him, we see ourselves and also what He requires from us! v25 "But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom." Yes "looks intently." *Parakupsas*. Bends down and peers into, investigates. As did Mary and John, into the darkness of the empty tomb of Jesus. Straining their eyes to see! No it's not a passing glance of superficial curiosity, but the pursuit of our eternal soul!

And so we continue in James 1:26-27: "Religion That God Accepts As Pure!" v26 "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." Brothers and sisters, this is actually quite a disturbing verse, as it speaks of spiritual self-deception. The word which James uses here for "religion," *threskos*, occurs nowhere else in the whole of the Bible. It is only in verses 26 and 27 of James chapter one. And apparently, there is no one word in English that captures its meaning. It literally means: *the outward appearance of piety! The observance of religious rituals* and what we might, call forms of religious practises.

Now Beloved, we can find this kind of stuff all over the place today. People glue themselves to roads in their efforts to be recognised as devotees of their green religion. Others chain themselves to the steering wheels of their cars, blocking main roads. Still others scale structures and trees and lie down in front of bulldozers, lashing themselves to things to prevent the progress of certain projects. Yes their zeal for their green idol is unquestionable! Jews cut their hair in a certain manner and wear a particular style of clothing and eat certain foods, and wail at their wall. While observing their traditions. Muslims pray four times a day wherever they happen to be, pointing themselves toward Mecca. They too wear a certain style of clothing, eat special foods, while also blowing themselves and others up in their religious zeal! Roman Catholics are very religious. They pray to dead Saints, go

into strange cubicles to confess their sins to men who supposedly can absolve them of their indiscretions. But of course only Jesus can do that. Their services are filled with much pomp and pageantry, and multiple ceremonies. They even hold to the idolatrous heresy that the Pope is in effect God on earth! Hindus make pilgrimage to the Ganges river and wash in the filthiest water known to man!

You see these are the kinds of things that James is Speaking of here. Those outward appearances of religion and piety. Perhaps like me, you too may have heard people speak of others saying, 'Oh that person is very religious.' But what they actually mean is that they have the appearance of some kind of religion!

Well having just said in v19, that "everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak," slow to use their tongue, James now says in v26 "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." In v12 of chapter 2, he says speak and act as those who are going to be judged. And in chapter 3, he really deals with the tongue at length.

So Beloved, this idea of using our words to either honour or dishonour God, is a tremendously important issue according to James. And I do want to draw your attention to the very first few words, because they are telling. "If anyone considers himself religious." It again compels us to refer to the image of the Pharisee in Luke 18:9-14 as we read: "to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, robbers, evil doers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Yes the Pharisee "considered himself religious." And he was, of this there is no doubt. Jesus even said in Matthew 5:20, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of heaven." But friends, Jesus was not saying that the Pharisees` religious acts was going to redeem them, no. But that anyone who seeks to get to heaven in their own strength, well, their religious acts would have to for out surpass the religious acts of the religious elite of the day! And of course we know, that this is indeed impossible. That is why Jesus had to come. "No one comes to the Father except by me' he said. The idea that we can live a life which is acceptable to God, and free from sin is an impossibility. Romans 3:23 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," Paul said.

But let's just say for interest sake, that we believed that it was indeed possible, (as many do today) yes we believed that it was possible to do certain things that made us acceptable to God, and we did them all. Yes, if we were indeed very religious. Well James says, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion worthless" In v2 he said, "Do not merely listen to the word of God and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." So only listening to God's Word is self-deception. And only having outward appearances of religion, is again a self-deception, if we do not "keep a tight rein on our tongue!" Paul speaks in 2 Timothy 3:13 of "imposters deceiving and being deceived."

Beloved, that's what all of this religion, this religious stuff, apart from Jesus, is all about. It's all a deception. It's a deception of those around us and worse still, it's a deception of ourselves! And

what is clear evidence of this deception? Well, if we “don't keep a tight rein upon our tongue.” But why is this such an evidence of the faith of a genuine believer? Well in response to the question from the religious elite, “Which is the greatest commandment?” In Mark 12:29-31 Jesus said, “The most important one is this”, he answered. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself.”

So if our tongue and our mouths are an outpouring and an expression of that which is inside of us, and those things are marked and filled with unloveliness, all of our external religion is indeed “worthless.” And Brethren, Thomas Manton explains that the thing about the tongue, is that it's the kind of weapon which can be used out in the open in rebellion and defiance of God, but it can also be used in secret! We may not be adulterers or rapists, or murderers or thieves or tax collectors. Those kinds of people who may be seen as openly reprobate sinners. No our outward appearance of religion has got all of those things covered. And yet what comes out of our mouths, reveals who we truly are!

Even as Jesus said in Matthew 5:5 “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.” And 5:8 “Blessed are the pure in heart. For they will see God.” As I've mentioned before, this is all about that purity of intention. The genuine believer's tongue speaks with no guile. No deception, no hidden agendas! Friends James is saying, how can we speak of the love of God when what often comes out of our mouths, is anything but love!

Brothers and sisters as I mentioned earlier, James is going to deal with the tongue at length in chapter 3:1-12. Speaking of bits in horse's mouths and the rudders of ships. So I don't want to dwell too long on that today. But I do want to touch upon this having “tight reins,” meaning this “bridling of our tongues.” Now some of us here have had quite a lot to do with horses. And those who have will tell you, that like people, they're all different. They have different personalities, quirks and mannerisms. Some are openly affectionate, while others are downright mean. Some really like being around people while others merely tolerate them. Some love attention, they love to be brushed and groomed, while others will try to kick you and bite you when you are trying to shoe them! Now while it is true that in general, it is the bit in the horse's mouth that keeps it in check so to speak, but it is the bridle which is attached to the reins and the bit, that actually keeps the horse contained, and controls the animal.

Indeed, you can train a horse to be ridden without a bit in its mouth at all and do what's called neck reining. Using a hackamore, that works by putting pressure on the horse's nose. The best of them will respond to the slightest touch upon the neck with the reins. And you can weave them in and out of trees without any effort, they are amazing to ride. I had one like that, he was the best horse that I have ever ridden. And although he was very timid and head shy because he had been mistreated and beaten about the head by a former owner, that horse would go anywhere for me! I put him over the edge of mountains that would take your breath away. And he did it, because he understood that I had control, and he trusted me. Hannah-Rose used to say, ‘Dad, that's a once in a lifetime horse. He'd do anything for you, because he loves you.’ Yes he would listen to my directions through the bridle and the reins because he knew that by doing so, it always going to keep both of us safe. And not only that, it would also keep us on the right path. Which is all important when you are riding through the dangers of the Snowy mountains!

Friends if a horse's head is not constrained, there is very little hope of it responding to your instructions. That animal will run wild and there will be no stopping it. One perfect example. There is a place down the Snowy mountains called the place where Dick got frightened, I kid you not. It is

literally the place where this man named Dick got frightened and he dropped the reins, and lost control of that horse, losing it over the edge of a thousand foot cliff. And that's the powerful picture that James is painting for us here! He is saying, that not only is all of that external religious stuff completely useless, if there is no evidence of true conversion coming out of our mouth, expressed in what we say and how we say it. But even worse than that, we are so clearly "deceived!" Yes that person is "deceiving their own heart" the original says. That person's "religion is worthless." It's the word "mataios." And it means: corrupt, perverted. Yes such things are all a deception of others and even of ourselves!

Again friends, James takes this evidence of those things which come out of our mouths which testify either for or against our Christianity, very seriously. Simply because it's an indication of whether or not we are the genuine article. Or are we just religious. Even very religious! These are good questions to ask ourselves Beloved!

Well having dealt in v26 with what false Christianity looks like, (a tongue uncontrolled by the speaker, is the sign of a heart uncontrolled by the Saviour) says Blanchard. Well now he shows us the hallmarks of genuine faith Christ. What it looks like practically. In response to God's Grace and Mercy, these are the sorts of things that we will do! But we are not earning our salvation no, we are responding to that salvation. Not "considering ourselves religious" by our religion, but responding with a humble, loving, and caring heart! v27 "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."

Friends, James is not saying that "looking after orphans and widows" is exclusively what authentic Christianity looks like, no. He is saying that it is having that spirit of generosity to those in need, whoever they may be. As Heather said some weeks ago, there seems to be destruction and disaster everywhere in the world today. The difficulty is knowing what to give and to whom we give it! Yes it's having a willing and generous spirit out of our gratitude to God, because of what He has given us and done for us through His Son Jesus! These were and in many ways still are the most vulnerable people. In those days though, if they had no advocate they were out on the streets and starving! In chapter 2, James will go on to speak of injustice. Of "showing partiality" when it came to legal decisions. Social work by the true believer, (for want of a better description) was and still is a clear reflection of God's goodness to us, and wanting to testify to that goodness by passing it on to others, those who are needy.

And friends in many ways, that hasn't changed for us today. Again, there are always people in need. Perhaps in some ways at least, more so now than ever before. And yes while we should be good stewards and be discerning with our funds, this shouldn't make us tight-fisted. Which in some ways shows a lack of our own faith in God's goodness to us! In Matthew 6, Jesus says, "Don't worry about what you will eat and what you will wear." Meaning God has given us His greatest gift (even His Own Son) will He not now provide for our daily needs? Well of course He will. So yes a spirit of willingness and generosity in the help of those in need, are indeed some of the hallmarks of genuine Christianity!

And yet Brethren there are two things that we need to be wary of. Firstly, that if we would give in the Name of Christ, then we must make sure that those who we give through, do truly own His Name. Because we need to be sure that those who receive those gifts understand that they do so, because they come from God! And secondly, we need to ensure, that the deed does not become the end in itself! Many organisations around the world began with the righteous intention of spreading the gospel, through providing for those in need. But over time, the good works, (and they were good

works) became the ends in themselves. The gospel component, the very reason for those organisations coming into being, have been cast aside. So feeding the poor and needy physically, (and yet leaving them in the pollution of their sin) seems to be all that matters. It's a real trap that we can easily fall into. But again no, we are not saved by these works, we are saved for them! v26 was all about religiousness and external practises, being seen to be pious and religious. But it's all a corruption, it's a perversion of the truth. Well in v27, James explains what God really wants to see as an outpouring of the saved heart and soul, even that which "is pure and faultless" meaning, without stain or corruption, so that it be acceptable in His sight. Yes it's that spirit of selfless generosity, and "to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Now friends, when James says, "the world" here, he doesn't mean the earth in which we live, no. Remember Genesis 1:31 "God saw all that he had made and behold it was very good." No he means that "world" of sinful humanity. That "world" which is marked by everything that is opposed to God! Genesis 6:5-6 "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain." Romans 1:21-25: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator who is forever praised. Amen!"

Yes friends it is to "keep oneself from being polluted" by that "world." Yes it is that "world" of evil which James speaks of. That "world" which "calls evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter" Isaiah 5:20. That "world" which promotes sexual immorality and perversion as though it were a good thing, even a wonderful thing that is to be celebrated and lauded. That "world" that does away with God's created order of male and female. Where a man that is 6 foot four with muscles can compete against a woman in sport and go into the women's toilets with little girls! Where lies and deception are the norm, and truth is almost a thing of the past. That "world" in which there are many gods yes a myriad of gods, and yet the One true and living God who created the universe and all that is in it, is blasphemed, mocked and ridiculed. While His Son and His people are persecuted and put to death!

Yes, Beloved this is that "world" of which James speaks. That "world" which has "exchanged the truth of God for a lie." Literally meaning, that "world" which is bowing down to the perversion and corruption of the false gods of idolatry! Romans 1:26 "Therefore God gave them over." Yes, Australia is "Ichabod" today. Which should be pronounced as a lament. "I cha bod." Because "the glory of the Lord has departed."

So how do we wrap this up this morning? Well friends we need to beware of "religion." God is not after "religion" from us, no. Those empty hearted and empty headed practises which we have looked briefly at today, where the chief goal is to be seen to be "religious" by others. Mean nothing to God, and are actually an abomination. We need to live before God with sincere hearts. Trusting in Him and His goodness to us in faith. And as an expression of that faith, we are to respond with a generous and willing spirit! We are to keep a "tight rein on our tongues," because we know the blessing that it can bring, but also the damage that it can do! And finally, we need to beware of becoming "polluted by the world." Of being drawn in and captivated by the immoral, perverse, and

in many ways, increasingly corrupt and anti-Christian society in which we live. This is The Religion That God accepts.”

Amen! Let's pray!