

PRACTICE MAKES PERSONS

“True Religion”

James 1:26-27 | February 10, 2019

Sermon Summary: Most of us have heard the line, “Christianity isn’t a religion; it’s a relationship.” And there’s much to like about that idea. Certainly our theology largely affirms it. We are *reconciled* to God by faith in Christ and his atoning sacrifice for our sins. Jesus prayed in John 17, “I in them and you in me”—a picture of the intimacy and unity he was forging between us and God. He told his disciples, “I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you,” meaning that he would send the Holy Spirit to indwell us and unite us to God. Christianity is, at bottom, a relationship with God. God’s face is turned toward us in grace, and our faces are turned toward his in faith. You might say that a relationship is the “heads side” of the Christian coin.

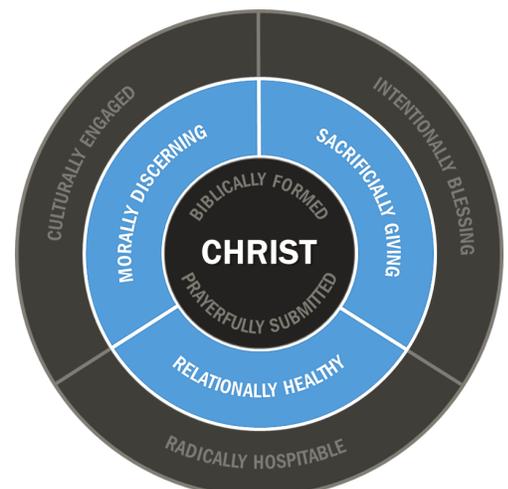
But coins are heads and tails. And sentences are a subject and a predicate. So too Christianity. If “heads” is a personal relationship with God, then “tails” is the activity that *tails* such faith. If the subject of our faith is a relationship with God, the predicate is what that relationship looks like in life. And here is where religion, properly understood, comes into play. Religion is simply what you do with what you believe. It’s the external, visible part of your faith. James says that True Religion consists of three things:

1. A Bridled Tongue. Why would James list this first? True Religion isn’t, first of all, Sunday worship or a personal quiet time or daily prayer—it’s verbal self-control? Yes, because out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45); because in the tongue is the power of life and death (Psalm 18:21); because God created all things by his powerful word—and we, believing a couple of subtle lies, plunged it all into ruin. Therefore the first sign of a transformed heart will be a transforming tongue. Before coming to Christ, most people spoke 10,000-30,000 words a day, for thousands of days; words full of lies, profanity, boasting, cursing, anger, and gossip. But now our mouths are under new management, and we bring them under Christ’s authority. In time we transform our words into grace, truth, and love. We use our tongues to form prayers, and offer encouragement, and speak new realities into being.

An unbridled tongue is self-deceptive: We think we are advancing our cause or “keeping it real” or “keeping it 100.” But we’re only giving our basest self too much credence while ignoring our new and true identity as Christ’s New Creations. Moreover, such a tongue—and its attendant religion—is worthless. That is, *futile*. It doesn’t advance our cause or God’s, whereas words of life do.

“3.” An Unstained Soul. We skip point 2 momentarily to go to point 3: “to keep oneself unstained from the world.” We traffic in words and the world more than anything else, so James calls for personal piety in both. What is the world? Well, it’s not mere Creation—we do want to get our hands dirty and our clothes stained in that! Rather, the world here is the whole sin-infected system of vision, values, and culture that stands apart from God. Admittedly that’s a big and complicated subject. It’s hard to see

Discipleship Focus:



how we can live in the world yet not be “of” it; how we can remain unstained without becoming separatists. But think about the categories of Money, Sex, and Power. The gospel calls us to distinctiveness in each of these realms. *Money*: We do not store up treasure on earth, but we invest in heaven. *Sex*: We receive it as a wonderful gift for marriage but reject it as a means of self-indulgence. *Power*: We exercise influence, but not by lording it over others. Instead, like Jesus, we are among people as those who serve.

2. A Compassionate Heart. Now back to point two. Sandwiched between two forms of personal piety is a call to social action: “to visit orphans and widows in their distress.” True Religion is holistic. It’s personal and public. It’s piety and social action. Orphans and widows were the most vulnerable populations in the ancient world, as they often are today. There was no life insurance, welfare, or social security, and few institutions. You had family, period. But with no family: what would you do? God’s answer: Be enfolded into his family! The whole church is built on the analogy of the family, with God as our Father and we as his children. True Religion makes that real by wrapping up the vulnerable in our loving, caring embrace, just as Jesus did for us.

Jesus had an eternal, personal relationship with God which he then expressed in “religious” service to us. He was unstained by sin, but took our sins upon himself. He was orphaned—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—that we might be adopted. And in his abject pain and suffering he bridled his tongue. He did not judge or condemn but said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Discussion Guide

1. “Christianity isn’t a religion; it’s a relationship”—how would you explain that to someone who considers it an incredulous claim?
2. The sermon suggested that Relationship and Religion are like two sides of a coin, or like the two parts of a sentence. Does that make sense to you? In your experience with churches or other Christians, which side did they accentuate, and which side did they neglect?
3. Process the three marks of True Religion in James 1:26-27.
 - *A Bridled Tongue* — How do you, or other Christians that you know, struggle most with this? What is the remedy? How do we grow in verbal self-control?
 - *An Unstained Soul* — William Wordsworth said, “The world too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers...We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!” Would you be willing to reveal one way in which you feel the world is too much with you? How do we keep ourselves “unstained” from the world without becoming separatists? In the “big three” of Money, Sex, and Power, how do you think we should be more holy than we typically are?
 - *A Compassionate Heart* — Of the vulnerable people you know—orphans, widows, the disabled, the impoverished, the undocumented, and more—who captures your heart most? Is there anyone in your life right now that you visit with love and care? If not, should there be?
4. Look up the *Letter to Diognetus* online and read it. What do you find most inspiring about it? If you could bring a prophetic word to our church today spurring us on toward this vision, what would it be? What exhortation would you give?
5. What is one bottom line take-away from this sermon that you’ll prayerfully apply to your life?