

Place: Lurgan Baptist 7:12:2003

Reading: James 1:16-27

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

11. WHAT KIND OF RELIGION DO YOU HAVE ?

To many people one of the dullest words in the English language is the word “*religion*.” It speaks of dreary discipline, a morbid mixture of what J.B. Philips somewhere calls “*rites and robes, bells and smells*.”

Now the word “*religion*,” means the outward practice, it speaks of the outward and external observance of our faith. It implies that has something has happened internally that manifests itself externally. It speaks of the acts, deeds and service that flow from our faith. The word “*religion*,” is actually used just a few times in the New Testament, and it has nothing to do with ceremonies, temples or special days. Moreover, when the Bible speaks of “*religion*,” its not talking about denominations. I have met a few over the years who put more stock in their denominational label than anything else. I heard the story about three churches in a little town. There was a Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist church. They were all struggling to exist. They finally decided that the only way they could survive was to merge.

They all gathered together to discuss the merger and the question came up what they should name the church. Finally after much discussion and dissension, one suggested that they call it a Christian Church. One fellow jumped and said, “*I was born a Baptist, I grew up a Baptist, I have never been anything but a Baptist, and on one is going to make a Christian out of me.*” Well, when James speaks about religion he is not talking about denominations. He is talking about obeying God’s Word , and sharing it with others through speech, service and separation from the world. Now we have seen in this opening chapter what a tremendous emphasis James places on the Word of God. He was a great Bible man, a man truly steeped in Holy Scripture.

He has been stressing the fact that as God’s people we should hear the Word (1:19-20) receive the Word

(1:21) and obey the Word. (1:22)

Now in these closing verses he’s saying that if our obedience to the Word of God is genuine it will show in our lives by certain distinguishing marks. Indeed he introduces us to the subject of false and true religion.

In essence he asks the question, “*what kind of religion do you have ?*” Practical as ever he says, “*I can tell by the marks, traits, qualities that are found in your life whether or not you’ve had a heart experience of salvation.*” So these two verse tell us something about false religion and something about true religion. Notice:

(1) SOMETHING ABOUT FALSE RELIGION

Now keep in mind that in (1:22-25) James has been dealing with what we might call the

Foundation of the Christians life, the need to come to the Word of God, to hear the Word (1:19-20) to receive the Word (1:21) and to obey the Word. (1:22) These verses tie in exactly with the parable that Christ told at the end of the gospel of Mathew (Ch 7) where He spoke about the man who built his house on the sand and the man who built his house on the rock. The Lord Jesus explained very clearly that the man who build on sand was a picture of a person who “ *hears these words of mine and does not do them.*” (Matt 7:26) But the man who built on rock was a picture of a person who “ *hears these words of mine and does them.* (Matt 7:24) Now that is the point that James has been pressing home in (1:22-25) the Foundation of the Christians life.

But now he turns to the Fabric of the Christians life, to the things that show on the surface, to the outward expressions that prove or disprove the claim of an inner experience. Here in these statement he tells us some things about false religion. He says that it is:

(a) SUPERFICIAL:

Mark two words in (1:26) “ *seem and deceiveth.*” The picture here is that of something that on the surface seems to be fine but when you begin to examine it closely you discover that it is lacking in depth and reality. It has the right name, the right shape, the right general appearance, but once you begin to examine it closely, you discover that is all there is to it. (a) Does the Bible not expose that sort of thing ? Paul speaks of those who “ *having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof.*” (2 Tim 3:5) Do you recall the Risen Lord’s analysis of the church at Sardis ? “ *Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.*” (Rev 3:1) *They had reputation but no reality.* A form, a name but nothing more. My is that not true about so much of our church life today ? Even our fundamental church life. Did you ever go into a museum and walk over to the birds and animals. I mean they are so lifelike, are they not ? But they are dead ! Is that a picture of us ? We have equated business with blessing, programme with progress, activity with spirituality, activity before men with acceptance before God and so much that we do as believers is superficial with no depth at all.

The story is told of Arnold Thomas of Bristol being shown around St. Paul’s Cathedral. During the tour he asked the guide whether he enjoyed his work. “ *Yes,*” he replied, “ *but there is one drawback. I never get to a place of worship.*” I wonder if that is true of us ? Do you ever think of the number of hours you spend at it, sitting in church, in prayer meetings, at Bible studies, in the choir, but how often do you and I really get to “ *a place of worship.*” Surely the test of any act of worship is this, are we aware of the presence of God ? Joseph Twitchell tells how he went to visit Horace Bushnell when Bushnell was an old man. At night, Bushnell took him for a walk on the hillside. As they walked in the dark, Bushnell suddenly said, “ *let us kneel and pray.*” Telling of it afterwards, Twitchell said, “ *I was afraid to stretch out my hand in the darkness in case I should touch the Lord.*” Do you ever feel like that ? Or is our religion lacking in reality ? When Sidlow Baxter came to the Iron Hall when he was 90 years of age, we were all aware of one thing. Here was a man who carried the presence of God with him. He was in touch with God. My are we going the mechanics of worship but there’s no real communion with God ? Do we give out of a sense of duty instead of out of love for Christ ?

Do we pray ? But is it merely a repetition of a few worn out phrases ? Do we sing but it touches no one's heart ? Do we preach but there's so little power in our preaching ? Have we got a form but no force, a reputation but no reality ? Have we got an outward appearance but no inward affection. False religion is (a)

(b) CARNAL:

Do you see (1:26) ? “ *And bridleth not his tongue,* ” in other words false religion is lacking in restraint. We have a saying, “ *the truth will out,* ” which means that sooner or later the real facts will emerge. Not only is that generally true but is especially true in the use of the tongue, which is why the Lord Jesus said, “ *Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.* ” (Matt 12:34) Out of the mouth comes the truth of what is in the heart, and how often it is true that a tongue uncontrolled by the speaker is the mark of a heart uncontrolled by the Saviour. One of the most terrible things about “ *sins of the tongue,* ” is that they come so easily. Thomas Manton once said, “ *Censuring is a pleasing sin, extremely compliant with nature.* ” Is that not so true ? Censuring, destructive criticism, backbiting, bitterness come so quickly to mind and to mouth. I mean we don't have to work hard to find fault with others. I've never been to the Norwegian fjords but I am told that on some of the mountainsides surrounding those fjords, the snow is so delicately poised that the sound of a human voice can bring it crashing down in an avalanche of damage, destruction and death.

Are there not situations and circumstances in our lives just like that ? Situations in church, at home, in business, situations poised so delicately that the sound of a human voice, yours and mine can bring an avalanche of distrust and disaster. My how many times even in Christian circles a work for God has been blighted and blasted by the effects of a carnal, uncontrolled tongue ? How each of us needs to cry with the psalmist, “ *Set a watch O Lord, before my mouth, keep the door of my lips.* ” (Ps 141:3) James is talking about false religion. He says it is (a) (b)

(c) INEFFECTUAL:

“ *This man's religion is vain,* ” (1:26) Or as the Amplified Bible has it, “ *this religious persons religious service is worthless, futile, barren.* ” Void of benefit and blessing. Isn't it so easy to be involved in a religious roundabout ? Lots of activity but no advance, a life, a programme, an orbit of organization that is always on the move but is never actually making any progress. My as far as God is concerned this sort of thing cuts no ice. To the God who searches our hearts superficial religious observance is a vanity. Do you recall that this is what Israel offered the Lord in Isaiah's day ? Do you know how God responded ? He said this, “ *To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me ? saith the Lord ? I am full of the burnt offerings of rams and the fat of red beasts, and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs or of he goats.* ” (Is 1:11) You see, they had outward ceremony but no inward reality, and God was sickened with their “ *vain offerings.* ”

(1:13) Do we not need to beware of this ?

All of our outward religion and service that is superficial, anything that is marked by pride and self-interest or a critical spirit, all of this is nothing more in God's sight than what Paul calls "wood, hay, stubble."

(1 Cor 3:12) It is condemned by God now and will be consumed by fire then, when we stand at the judgement seat of Christ. (1)

(2) SOMETHING ABOUT TRUE RELIGION

Do you see what he says ? (1:26) The phrase " *before God and the Father,*" simply means " *in God's eyes.*" Now notice that we are dealing here not with regeneration, but with religion, the practical outworking of regeneration. And James is telling us that this consists not in what we Believe, but in how we Behave. Now James is not discrediting doctrine, none of the Bible writers do that. The importance of what we believe is recognised right throughout Scripture as being fundamental and essential. But it is that " *something else,*" that James is underlining. You see, I think that James is acquainted with that kind of Christian whom we meet up with today. The person who is thoroughly

" *sound,*" and yet thoroughly " *unpleasant.*" Now as we look here at the marks of true religion we must see and understand that there is:

(a) NO CONFLICT IN GOD'S WORD:

Do you see how James begins ? " *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this*" but how does he goes on ? Does he speak about some massive theological issue such as the Deity of Christ, or Redemption by the blood of Christ, or Regeneration by the Spirit of God ? No ! rather he speaks about pastoral visitation and living a godly life. Is there a flaw in James's writing ? Is James advocating another way of salvation than the way spoken of by Paul who said, " *By grace are ye saved through faith, ... boast.*"

(Eph 2:8-9) Is there any conflict between James and Paul ? Martin Luther thought there was and that's why he called this " *an epistle of straw.*" But there is no conflict in God's Word. What Paul is saying in

(Eph 2:8) is that " *Justification never results from good works,*" what James is saying here is that

" *Justification always results in good works,*" that is good works are the natural outcome of a spiritual income. Of course if you read Paul and James widely and deeply enough you'll discover that they also teach each others distinctive truths because they were both taught by the same Holy Spirit. So there is (a) and there is:

(b) NO CONFUSION ABOUT GOD'S WILL:

Those two words in (1:27) " *is this,*" are expanded by a paraphrase to read, " *will show itself by such things as.*" Now James is not saying that what follows is the only action of which God approves. The only thing that can be classified as " *pure religion and undefiled.*" No ! What he is saying, is that this is a typical example of the way in which a living faith will show itself. This is the kind of thing you would expect to see in the life of a believer. My if we have a living

faith, then that faith will show itself. There will be certain marks in our lives. The marks of pure, genuine religion. Do you see what they are ? The first is

1. A CONTROLLED TONGUE:

You see, if one of the marks of false religion is an uncontrolled tongue, then one of the marks of true religion is a controlled tongue. Obviously wagging tongues were wreaking havoc in the early church for James mentions time and again. (1:19 2:12 3:1-3 4:11)

What are you using your tongue for ? Are you using this organ to glorify Christ ? Or to castigate others ? Xanthus, the philosopher informed his servant that a few friends were to have dinner with him the next day and instructed him to serve the very best thing that he could find in the market. The philosopher and his guests had anticipated a sumptuous feast but all the servant brought in was tongue. It was prepared in different ways but every course was tongue. Xanthus called his servant aside and said with disappointment, “ *Didn't I tell you to serve the best thing I the market !*” To which the servant replied, “ *I did get the best thing that could be found in the market. Isn't the tongue the organ of sociability, the organ of eloquence, the organ of kindness and the organ of worship ?*” Then the philosopher told his servant, “ *Tomorrow I want you to serve the worst thing that you could find in the market.*” The next day Xanthus and his guests were much surprised to find that there was no change in the menu. The philosopher scolded, “ *Didn't I tell you to serve the worst thing that you could find in the market ?*” Again the servant told him, “ *I did for isn't the tongue, the organ of blasphemy, the organ of lying, the organ of defamation, and the organ of slander.*” That day the teacher was taught. What about your tongue ? You see, James says that the tongue is a spiritual thermometer. It indicates how you're doing spiritually. Tell me, than how are you doing ? My if our tongues are uncontrolled where is the proof that we really are the Lords ? (1)

(2) A COMPASSIONATE HEART:

Let me give it to you in the Amplified Bible, “ *To visit and help and care for the orphans and widows in their affliction.*” Does James mean that if we pay some folks a visit everything will be alright ? No ! The word

“ visit,” here does not mean to pop in and pay a cherry call. It suggests the idea “ *to care for; to look after.*” The same word is used in (Lk 1:68) where it says, “ *God hath visited His people.*”

Take a personal interest in, express loving concern for the orphans and widows.

This word “ *visit,*” means “ *to care, to exercise oversight, to help.*” The verb in our text comes from a noun that gives us the word “ *bishop,*” one that is an overseer, or elder. *Is this not the duty of elders Specifically ?* To care, to visit, to help ! That's why we have divided the church directory into sections and the elders are responsible for their section ! But *is this not the duty of Christians Generally ?* Do you see that word

“ *affliction,*” it appears in the A.V. in many other forms

“ *anguish, burdened, distress, persecution, tribulation, trouble.*” The main sense of the word seems to be

“ *pressure.*” People under pressure ! Does that open your eyes to the tremendous range of human need there is in the world today ? In the church today ? My there are people under pressure in

your community, in your church, in your seat this ?

Have you a heart of compassion for them ? Have you a hand of practical helpfulness for them ? Is there something something that you and I ought to be doing ? It may be something that costs, but it will be something that counts ! Now are you beginning to see what is near to the heart of God ? (1) (2)

(3) A CONSECRATED LIFE:

“ *And to keep oneself unspotted and uncontaminated from the world,*” (A.N.T.) The world refers to the invisible spiritual system of evil. And the world’s system is opposed to God. Later on James says, “ *Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God,*” (4:4) Now what is worldliness ? Is it what you do ? Where you go ? Or is it what you think ? My is worldliness not the attitude that puts “ *the things on the earth,*” before “ *the things which are above.*”

(Col 3:1-2) Someone has said, “ *Worldliness is the enthronement of something other than God as the supreme object of man’s interest’s and affections.*” That is the acid test. Paul says, “ *the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.*” (2 Cor 4:18) What are the things that we can see ? Or weigh ? Or measure ? Or feel ? Or touch ? Or count ? These things are just temporal, passing. But how much of our mind and our time do they occupy ?

How much of our interest ? How much of our care and concern are given to these things ? How much of our devotion are given to them ? Do you know what a consecrated life means ? Separation from the world, and separation unto God ! *One of the great issues facing the church as we have entered the third millennium is the credibility crisis !* Are we credible ? Are we living a lie or are we living a Christ-like life ? To be credible we must do what the Bible says. Let me ask you then, what kind of religion do you have ? False or True ? Are the marks of godliness evident in your life ? *A Controlled tongue, a Compassionate heart, a Consecrated Life ?*