**The Evidence of Genuine Faith**

**James 1:26-27**

Good morning. Please open your Bibles to the Epistle of James. Today we will be discussing chapter 1 verses 26-27 and the title of the sermon is “The Evidence of Genuine Faith.” Today we will be concluding the first chapter of this epistle by discussing what it means to have a genuine faith in God. In this first chapter the Apostle James has laid the foundation that having a strong faith in God, but not confirming that faith with works makes that a very empty faith. Two weeks ago, we discussed what the man who has looked at himself in the mirror does when he sees that he is a sinner in need of salvation. The man looks at himself and then makes the change to who he is through the power of the Holy Spirit who enlightens each man with the knowledge of what it means to be a child of God. Today in these two concluding verses to chapter 1 James will make the case that being a religious person is not something that someone can just claim. That proclamation needs to be accompanied with action. In this specific case the action is the controlling of the tongue. If we say that we are believers in God, yet do not show our belief in the way that we speak to others then others will conclude that our faith is null and void. Let us start today by reading together verses 26 and 27. **26If anyone thinks himself to be religious yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this person’s religion is worthless. 27Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.**

Looking carefully at verse 26 we see that James begins by making the assertion that there are many people in the world who believe that they are religious. What would you say most people think of when they make the claim they are religious? Most of the time someone thinks that being religious is following a set of teachings that have been established by a religion. Normally this is done through action only with the goal of winning approval from the deity that the religion has established as having the authority. One example of this would be Greek and Roman mythology. The Greeks and Romans believed that there was a plethora of gods who oversaw different aspects of life. To get the approval of the gods mankind would have to act in ways that would win their support. Hercules, the strongest man to ever live according to mythology, earned the respect of Zeus by completing a series of impossible tasks. He did these tasks to make up for evil that he had committed earlier in life. Another example of religious people in Scripture were the Canaanites who worshiped the god Molec. They would sacrifice their children on alters to Molec in exchange for fertility of the land and good fortune. Each of these people believed that being religious was shown through obedience to the deity through their actions. These gods only saw what was on the outside of man and therefore were not concerned with the heart. What we are going to learn is that the God of Scripture does not act in a manner like any manmade god and that the way to be right with Him is not based on the effort of man, but on His grace alone through Jesus Christ.

The point that James is making in verse 26 is that being obedient to God only through thoughts and not with the heart makes a man deceive himself. It is wrong to think that God will honor the person who claims to be a believer yet does not do what God commands in His word. The specific example James gives in this verse is the bridling of the tongue. We will run in to this topic again when we get to chapter 3 of the epistle. Bridling the tongue means to control it. If we claim that we trust Christ as our Savior, but still talk and act as those in the world who are not saved what use is it to have faith in Christ? When someone confesses to be a follower of Christ that statement must be supported with a way of speaking and acting that is different than what the world knows. Scripture teaches clearly both in the Old and New Testaments that being a faithful believer of God is blessed by God when that faith is supported by action.

One such example is Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation. He was seen as righteous in the eyes of God because of his belief that what God said would come true. “Then he believed in the Lord; and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). Abraham could have claimed to be a religious man by doing what God said, but what Scripture records is that Abraham was righteous because he believed in God. So, the life of Abraham was blessed by God because of his faith which was shown by his actions as supported by his words. If Abraham had believed in God, but refused to do what God commanded his religion would have been worthless. So, this leads us to the point that James is making in the next verse. What is a worthwhile religion? James will give us the recipe for the expression of genuine faith.

There are two specific ingredients James provides in verse 27 that explains for the reader what it means to be a purely religious person. The first part of having a genuine faith in God and showing it is “to visit orphans and widows in their distress.” When we think about these two groups of people in our society today we know that they exist, but fortunately there are more services to help these groups today than what was available when James wrote his epistle. To be an orphan or a widow in the days of the early church was a destitute situation to be in. Support from the government was unheard of and the only way that either of these people were going to survive would be through the generosity of others in the community. According to Relevant Magazine, “widows and orphans were among the most defenseless people in society. Women had few opportunities to provide for themselves without a husband, and children had little infrastructure to rely on if family fell through.” These groups still exist in our society today and we know that God does not change. God does not just command for the most marginalized in society to be taken care of because He loves all people, but God also wants His people to flourish. The only way that will happen is if all people are cared for in the nation. Children, of course, are the future of the nation and the elderly are the ones who provide the wisdom that will guide the decisions of the next generation. To be a religious person means that you care about all people equally despite what they can offer to the society. God looks at the heart of a person and is not impressed with their intelligence, height, or their name. As James will tell us later God does not practice favoritism. Neither should those who profess faith in Him. So, the first ingredient of pure religion is to carry out deeds of compassion for others.

The second aspect of pure religion is righteous living. James writes “to keep oneself unstained from the world.” This idea is supported in Scripture several times because being a believer in God means that a person should live in a different way than those who are not. The reason this is so important is because the way that a non-believer may come to faith is through the testimony of those who profess belief in God. The argument of hypocrisy that many people make against Christianity is accurate because all of us do not always practice what we say we believe. This shows our need to constantly be in the word and encourage each other. Being unstained by the world means that we need to put ourselves in situations where we are supported to live out our faith consistently. At the same time, we also need to avoid situations which would cause us to stumble or cause others to come to a misunderstanding of our faith. Sometimes this is hard to do because to take a stand for Christ can cause conflict. This is to be expected, however, because Jesus Himself said that He did not come to bring peace but a sword. The key to avoiding such situations is to show others that we love them without having to affirm what they are doing if it does not align with the teachings of Scripture. We can love without affirming something, especially if the action in question is sin. We must remember that living a life as a loving Christian is not easy, but as we have discussed the reward is great. Let this hope of eternal relationship with God encourage us as we continue to live in honor of the Lord.

**Applications**

1. Our first application today is the fact that being a purely religious person means that someone must not only understand the religion, but that knowledge must be accompanied by action. James specifically warns his readers that if they say they are religious, yet do not control their tongues they are fooling themselves. Why is this so? To think that you are religious, yet speak ill of others, judge them as if you are the judge or act in hypocrisy by not practicing what you say you believe are all examples of not bridling the tongue. The Apostle John in his first epistle writes “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother *and sister*” (3:10). Being a righteous person is firstly the one who does what God commands and the second piece of evidence to prove this is when someone shows love for his brother. If we say that we love God, but do not show love to our brothers and sisters this shows that our belief in God is worthless. Let us be Christians who are first known by our love, then when others know we love them they will be open to hearing the gospel message.
2. A pure religious life is also evidenced by the way that we take care of others who are in need. James specifically mentions orphans and widows in his writing. As we have already discovered he mentions these people because they were the most in need in that society at that time. To visit them and care for them was a big cost and an act that would not normally merit anyone a reward in this life. What we learn here is that God sees what is done for the lowest of the low by his people and He will reward those who are faithful in following His commands. God Himself has always commanded mercy and acceptance of those who were not Israelites but traveled with them. Our Bible reading this week had us in Leviticus if you are following that plan. So many times, God mentions the strangers that are traveling with the Israelites. He commanded that they be accepted and treated with kindness because Israel were strangers in Egypt for those four centuries. Not only does God care for the oppressed, but Jesus also taught that whatever is done in secret will be rewarded by the Father in heaven. He makes this point when He is discussing the sharing with the poor. “But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your charitable giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:3-4). Helping those in need without seeking recognition is another sign of a pure religion. God respects those who follow His commands and do so without the desire to be acknowledged for it.
3. And thirdly, a purely religious life is evidenced by an unspotted life. Now, before we get too far into this I want to make it clear that James is not arguing that a religious person must be free from sin. Thank goodness this is not the case, because if this was so all of us would be in a lot of trouble. James is making the point that someone who claims to be religious needs to fight against sin and work as hard as possible to not become stained by that sin. Matthew Henry makes this comment regarding verse 27 “The world is apt to spot and blemish the soul, and it is hard to live in it, and have to do with it, and not be defiled; but this must be our constant endeavor. Herein consists pure and undefiled religion. The very things of the world too much taint our spirits, if we are much conversant with them; but the sins and lusts of the world deface and defile them very woefully indeed. John comprises *all that is in the world,* which we are not to love, under three heads: *the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life;* and to keep ourselves unspotted from all these is to keep ourselves unspotted from the world. May God by his grace keep both our hearts and lives clean from the love of the world, and from the temptations of wicked worldly men.” Keeping ourselves unspotted is a work that is constant and never ends in this life. We must always be on guard so that we can guard of hearts and minds from the lusts of sin that surround us every day. There are a few ways that we can guard our hearts and minds. The first way is to equip ourselves with the truth of Scripture. Our daily reading gives us the knowledge of God and the ability to speak His word when we are tempted to sin. Jesus used the Word of God when He responded to Satan’s temptations in the wilderness. We need to follow His example and do the same. A second way to guard ourselves is to be active in the local church by being in the presence of God’s people as much as possible. Whenever there is an opportunity to gather we need to take advantage of it. I hope that you can say, as I know Katie and I can, that being together as a church family strengthens the heart and renews the mind. And in conclusion, a third way to guard our hearts and minds is by preaching the good news in our lives to those who need to hear it. By preaching we are equipping our minds with the courage and determination to share Jesus with all who need to know Him. When we do these things we equip our hearts and minds to remain unspotted by the world. In this way we show that our religion is pure. As we prepare our hearts and minds today for communion let us focus on the ways that God has blessed us and let us seek to humbly do His will in our lives. Please join me in a word of prayer.