

## **James: The Essence of Christian Living**

**James 1:19-27**

**By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)**

*August 18, 2002*

If you have your Bibles I would invite you to turn with me to James chapter one as we continue through this great book together. In the very words of greetings the first week we were studying this book, we said that James was preparing us for the trials of the Christian life, even as he called us the twelve tribes scattered abroad in that language which harkens from the Old Testament. And the story of the Exodus and of the exile does indeed remind us as pilgrims that we are, as Christians, we are pilgrims in this world. We are God's children, but we are not yet home, and what perfect language to prepare us for his discussion of trials. We looked at those verses last week, and we saw that James was very concerned that we respond to trials in an appropriate Christian, and biblical way. What do you do when you run into the ordeals of life, the afflictions, unexpected trials, that stunning grim diagnosis is given, the loss of a child, the loss of a job, infidelity of a spouse, seriously difficulty with children, and on, and on. How do you respond? Well, James is very concerned that believers respond in the right sort of way. He says that in those circumstances we are to "consider it all joy."

How in the world can that be realistic? Well it can only be realistic if we believe that the heavenly Father has designed afflictions as the medicine of grace. Those afflictions and trials which we face in this life are designed to make us to be what He intends us to be, and consequently, the way that Christians view trials is entirely different from the way anyone else will. It is typical, isn't it, for so many to respond to difficult trials by saying, "Why? Why has this happened to me? Why has God allowing this to happen.?" And we said that James's instruction presses us in another direction.

Let me illustrate this for you. If you had been with the men who were going ashore at Normandy, on D Day, all those years ago, I don't think you would have found many of them turning to their chaplains, as the gates swung down into the water and onto the beach and saying, "Why is this happening to me?" It was what they had been training for. That was their moment, that's the preparation, that was what they were out there to do, it was the job that they had been prepared for. Well, so also in the Christian life when we face trials our response is, "This is what the means of grace have been preparing me for. This is what

*The Catechism* was for. This is what the memorization of Scripture was for. This is what all those Sundays under the word of God was for, to prepare me to be faithful in this time, that I might be proven in this trial.” And so the Christian response to trials is very different from the response of the world around us.

Now, when you get to James 1:19, it seems again as if James has changed the subject on you. And you maybe wondering, “How do we go from trials, to distinguishing true Christianity from false Christianity? What's the connection?” Well, you'll see the connection in the very first words of verse 19, and you'll see it in the content that James has been talking about in the previous verses, the verses immediately prior to verse 19. But let's hear what James has to say by going to God's word in James 1:19.

This you know, my beloved brethren. Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted which is able to save your souls. But prove your selves doers of the word and not merely hearers that delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural in a mirror, for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer, but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does. If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Amen. This is Gods word may He add His blessings to it. Let's pray.

*Our Lord, this day, we would be both hearers and doers of the word. And so grant that we would hear with the desire to be changed. Grant us attention and search our hearts out by Your own Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

The Bible teaches, that it is possible to claim to be a Christian, and yet not to be a Christian. James in particular teaches that it is possible to claim to be a Christian, and yet not to be one. And James will be relentless in his diagnosis of this from this point in James 1:19 all the way, at least, to the end of James chapter two.

What is the connection between that and trials? Well, you have perhaps already sensed that James teaches that trials often reveal to us whether we are that double minded man who does not trust in the Lord, or whether we are that single minded man whose faith is in the Lord. And towards the end of his discussion of

trials, he's already talking to us about the impact of the new birth in us, and the change, the difference that that makes in our lives. And so he naturally transitions from that discussion to a discussion of the difference between true Christianity and false Christianity, between true godliness and false godliness, between those who profess to be righteous but aren't, and those who are in fact righteous, between those who profess to be religious but aren't, and those who are in fact professing the true religion.

And so as he pursues those goals here, he teaches us at least three things, and I'd like for you to see those things with me today. First, in verses 19 and 20, you will see James teach that true Christianity permeates our relationships and behavior. Secondly, in verses 21-25, he'll teach that true Christianity, not only hears the word of God, but does the word of God. And then in verses 26-27, he teaches that true Christianity entails both personal piety and public morality. All three of those things he teaches in this passage. Let's look at each of them, first in verses 19-29.

### **I. True Christianity permeates everything in life.**

Here James makes it clear that true Christianity permeates our relationships, our behavior, everything in life. As far as James is concerned, true godliness is integrated, not segregated. That is, it permeates all of our life and relationships. Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Isn't it interesting, that in diagnosing our claims of Christianity, James goes immediately to the practical issue of Christian's behavior in relationships. Listening is a relational action. Speaking is normally a relational action, although some people have conversations when nobody's there and then you begin to wonder about them. Anger is again a relational response, an emotional response in the context of a relationship and James goes right to these things and says, these things must evidence the reality of the new birth. In other words, in the Christian life the evidence of the new birth is a new life. Our speech ought to evidence a new life. Our listening ought to evidence a new life. Our control of our emotions, our emotional disposition and temperament, is to reflect the new life.

Why does he choose to talk about these things? Because it is in these things, not in our quiet time, not in our small group, not even in our Sunday morning attendance in the pews at 11 o'clock, not even there, do we see the measure of our Christianity, but it is in our life, our character, our responses, our relationships that we see true Christianity. Spiritual life is not something practiced privately. There are private components to spiritual life, but spiritual life is not that time when we're doing our quiet time, or family devotion, or with a small group or with accountability partners, or off on a retreat. Spiritual life is woven into the fabric of who we are.

It's not done on Sunday morning at 11 o'clock; it is manifest in all of our waking hours and in every relationship of life. In other words, it's integrated not segregated. It is woven into the whole, that's what I mean by that phrase.

A segregated spirituality encourages us to live a parallel life. On the one hand, reading the bible, praying occasionally, meeting with a group, doing devotions, and yet that same person participating in that activity, living a life which is essentially worldly, making worldly choices, acting with a worldly value system, doing immoral things, living in his business relationships in a way which dishonors God, living in his family relationships in a way which dishonors God. That kind of parallel life is characteristic of segregated spirituality.

But James is calling for an integrated spirituality in which church and family worship, and accountability partners, and Bible study are the means to help you live the Christian life in Christ, and to manifest your Christianity in your character and relationships. And James picks one example to diagnose a Christian life which is out of whack, and you see it in verse 20. "The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." He could have chosen other things, but this one speaks to so many of us. Our inappropriate anger manifests a heart condition that is the opposite of God's righteous plan for us. His plan is to transform us by grace, and anger which is out of control and inappropriate is a sign that something is deeply wrong. Our emotional life, our speech, the way we listen, our relationships, all of these things provide an indication of our sanctification. They are a test of our real godliness. They show us the state of our Christianity.

What do those things tell you? Some of us, today, having heard what James is saying, ought to be saying to ourselves, "I've been fooling myself. I call myself a Christian, but I'm not." If that's your reaction to James' diagnosis here, to God's diagnosis through the words of James, there's only one thing for you to do and that is run to Jesus Christ and the cross because you can't fix yourself. The Christian life is not an endless series of resolutions to do better. The Christian life is not turning a new leaf. The Christian life is not just the latest and greatest of self help remedies.

The Christian life is a recognition that we do not have within ourselves the energy, the power, the ability to change ourselves, we need to look somewhere else. And the only 'somewhere else' to look for that is in Jesus Christ and at the cross. It's when we renounce our own ability to try and change ourselves and we run to Him for grace to change us that we find salvation and grace to change. And so, if you having been diagnosed by the word of God and realize that you're fooling yourself, that's where you need to go. If you profess the faith but realize that you don't possess it, you need begin by going to Jesus Christ.

For others of you, it may just be dawning on you that your view of Christianity is out of whack and that you need a new mindset. You may be one of those people

practicing a segregated spirituality. You do some things that are spiritual, you read your Bible, you pray occasionally, you will go to a group, a men's meeting, a ladies Bible study and to church, but you realize the things that you are doing there are not permeating the rest of your life. And you realize that you need an integrated spirituality. Well if that's the case then you need to go to God the Holy Spirit. And you need to ask the Holy Spirit to renovate the whole of your life, to change your mindset and your outlook, to give you new priorities, to determine not to be a Sunday morning, 11 o'clock Christian, but to live the life of faith, to worship God in all of life, even as you come to worship.

For still others of you, these words may be revealing to you serious deficiencies in your own character and relationships. You may recognize the anger that James is talking about. You may recognize the lack of appropriate speech, or listening, that James is talking about. For you, James' words ought to move you to repentance, to change, to growth, and again you will need the help of the Holy Spirit to grow and change. Spiritual life is not the work of a moment; it's the work of a lifetime. And James is calling us in this passage to grow in grace, to manifest the new life and not to manifest it in one private part of life, but in all of life.

## **II. True Christianity not only hears God's word but does God's word.**

Secondly, in verses 21 through 25, James goes on to say that true Christianity not only hears the word of God but does the word of God. True godliness doesn't merely ascent to the word of God, it lives the word of God. James reminds us in this passage that true godliness involves both a negative and a positive activity. It's both active and passive. In this case in verse 21, James enjoins a negative activity. We are to put aside sin. It kind of reminds us of Paul's word about putting off and putting on. We are to put aside the remnants of sin in our own lives. We are to get rid of it, we are to deliberately seek to expunge it but correspondingly he speaks of a positive activity. And that activity is receiving the word of God implanted, and by the *word* he means the Scripture, the Law of God, the royal law, all of it, the whole of Scripture.

And so he is speaking of the word of God as a means of grace for sanctification. It is the way that God grows us, it is the instrument that God uses in our lives to grow us in grace. Sitting under the reading of the word of God, sitting under the proclamation of the word of God is not merely to tickle our ears, or to tickly our fancy, it's not merely to interest us or to inform us, it is designed to transform us by God's grace. And our temptation here at First Presbyterian Church, because we have had so many years of faithful teaching, faithful teaching in years past in the pulpit, faithful teaching in the Sunday school class, is to be passive listeners, to sit back, to be spectators in the teaching in the preaching of God's word.

Do you hear God's word as a spectator? Do you hear God's word as a sermon taster? Do you think, "Boy, Dr. Currid sure does know a lot about Egyptology and

the book of Exodus.” Do you think, “Boy, I like Derek Thomas's accent.” Or when you come to hear the word of God do you come as a spiritually starving believer desires, hungry to be fed with God, to be fed with His grace, to be fed with the truth of the word so that your life will be transformed? Do you come realizing that you need this as a means of grace that you are going to walk faithfully in the days ahead? Do you come hungry for spiritual nourishment and looking for sanctification? James says, true godliness doesn't just hear the word and ascent to it, “Oh, I believe that, I can accept that.” True godliness hears and lives the word of God. And James gives the diagnostic for this right here in this passage.

In verse 22 James speaks of hearers and doers of the word. “Prove yourselves doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” Now, be clear about this, James is ripping this off from Jesus. This whole section of James is a pure rip off of Jesus, it comes right from the Sermon on the Mount and the regular teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. James should have put a footnote at the bottom saying, “This whole thing was borrowed from Jesus, I'm not giving you a single original idea.” This is Jesus' teaching that James is reduplicating. And he says simply this, “Are we hearers or doers? Do we listen but never learn in practice, or do we listen and live. Are our lips and our lives coordinated?”

In versus 23 and 24, James describes the hearer, the sermon taster, the one who listens but who doesn't learn. He is one who listens, or to use his word, looks at the law, looks at the word of God, and then he goes away and he forgets what He taught him. That's the hearer, he ascends to it, not that he has an argument with it, it just makes no impact, it never permeates his heart, it never touches him in the deep recesses of his soul, or impacts him in his character or behavior.

On the other hand, in verse 25, he describes the doer, which is shorthand for the hearer and doer. The doer, James says, looks at the law, looks at the word, and he lives by that word, he acts on that word, he lives it out, he obeys it, it frees him, it's a law of liberty and freedom, he loves it. Why, because, God has done in him what He promised to do through Jeremiah, He has written His word on his heart. So he abides it. That word is constantly reminding him of his need for forgiveness, and God's provision of that forgiveness, by grace in Jesus Christ. That word is constantly reminding him of His way or righteousness and he is therefore walking it.

Our obedience to the word of God, or response to the word of God, is a diagnostic of our spiritual condition. The test of whether you believe God's word is whether you obey it, especially when it runs counter to your desires. That's when you know whether you are a hearer and a doer of God's word. And true Christianity not only hears the word of God, but it does the word of God.

### **III. True Christianity involves both personal piety and public morality.**

But James is not finished with diagnostics; he's got one more. Look at verses 26 and 27.

Here, he teaches us that true Christianity entails both personal piety and public morality. True godliness is expressed both in our inner life and in our outward practical compassion. James, in these two verses, gives you three more behaviors, three more activities, three more instances by which we can get an indication of the reality of our faith and religion. Look at these three things. Look at your tongue, look at your compassion, and then look at your separation from the world.

In verse 26, James returns to the tongue as a diagnostic device for measuring the inner life and taking stock of the heart. And again, it's just what Jesus said, "What comes out of a man's heart," Jesus said, "is reflected in his speech." Or, rather, this way, the things that come out of a man's mouth, issue forth from his heart. So that our speech, our tongue, our self-control or lack of self-control, is a manifestation of what is in our hearts. And James just flatly says, "If you do not bridle your tongue, you are deceiving yourselves. Your religion is worthless." It's a hard word to speak, for there are few areas more difficult for us to control than our tongues. But that in and of itself, is only symptomatic of the heart issue, the issue of the inner life, and James is reminding you of it.

In verse 27, he goes on to say that our compassion for those who are in need, especially those who are part of the Christian family, is an indication of grace in our hearts, tangible compassion towards those who are in need. This has not been a strong area for evangelicals. Generally, when people start talking about this, we suspect there is a liberal in the room somewhere, this is the social gospel. But I want you to notice that James is not pitting humanitarianism over against Christian faith and life as an alternative. He's not arguing that Christianity is a life, not a doctrine like our old liberal friends used to do. He's not suggesting an ethic as an alternative to a religion.

No, he is saying this: Christianity has an indispensable corporate external and social dimension. Our British Christian friends have generally done better at this than American Christians. And this is precisely why we must be so concerned for the ministry of mercy in our own midst. That's one reason that God gave us deacons, to be ministers of mercy and to teach us how to be merciful, an tangibly, externally, and compassionately ministering to those who are in distress, in need, and who are outcast and overlooked. It was John Calvin who said that "Our Christianity is shown by self-denial, compassion, and well doing to neighbors." It wasn't some liberal, it was Calvin.

And James is saying, you want to see if you really are a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ? Take a look at your tangible compassion towards those in need.

What does it say about you?

Finally in verse 27 he goes on to say that our determination to resist worldliness in heart and action is an evidence of the inner life. Keeping one's self unstained by the world. You see, for James true godliness is both internal and external. True godliness entails an inner life, an embrace of truth, a transformation of heart, a personal piety, but it manifests itself in the way we show compassion to one another. You see, what James is saying is that there is no such thing as justification without sanctification, there is no such thing as the new birth without the new life, there is no such thing as grace without obedience because grace works. That's what James is saying. And he is saying that because he doesn't want anybody sitting on a chair or a pew in a Christian church anywhere who thinks he's a Christian, but isn't.

Oh, we're happy to have nonChristians sitting in a pew. It gives us an opportunity to show our hearts and to press our claims with our friends. But what a tragedy it is when there is someone sitting in a pew that's a nonChristian who thinks he's a Christian. He's immune from the gospel. And James gives us this diagnostic so that we would not be self-deceived.

Oh, my friends, we must respond to that utmost seriousness. Look at our lives, are we in Christ, is there in grace there, are we growing in grace? And if we're not, run to the One who can grant it. Let's pray.

*Our Lord, and our God. We bow before You, and we acknowledge our sin, we see our own self in this passage. Convict us of it. Search us out by Your Spirit, change us, grow us in grace, for Your glory and in our good we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.*

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.*



This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

**Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).