

HOW GENUINE ARE YOU?

James 1:19-27

Objective: To realize that genuine Christianity is a life formed by the gospel message.

Many years ago, I found a small paperback book that was a commentary on the Epistle of James that was written to help teenagers understand this book of the Bible. The title of the book by Ethel Barrett was “Will the Real Phony Please Stand Up?” This title was a takeoff on the “What’s My Line” TV show of the 1960s. The idea of the show was that three contestants would all claim to be a person who had accomplished something and a panel of celebrities would ask a series of questions to determine which guest was the “real” person all three were claiming to be.

All of us do a pretty good job of presenting a public persona of “who we are” to the world in which we live. You probably have noticed that some people have one persona at work, another persona at home, and still another one at church. So how do you tell which one is the real person? I think most use a “rule of thumb” that could be called “look for the lowest common denominator.” That is a phrase that comes from grammar school mathematics that is used when adding fractions. We aren’t adding fractions, but all of us tend to think that each person has a lower limit of common decency that he or she will not violate. For some that limit is set at a pretty high level and for some it is pretty low. We probably don’t ever pretend to be less noble than we are, but do find ourselves putting on a pretty face that hides the reality of “who we are.”

The second part of the first chapter of James’ letter looks at this question of “belief and behavior” and examines it in the light of what we say and what we do. We will look at being receptive to God’s word (James 1:19-21); practicing or Acting on God’s Word (James 1:22-25); and applying God’s word (James 1:26-27).

Accept God’s Word

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. James 1:19-21 NIV

James seems to be a very practical person and was probably a good teacher. In the first part of the chapter (first 18 verses) he presented a basic life philosophy of how we should look at things that happen around us and to us. Now he has moved into some practical applications of what should result from seeing life from the perspective he has just presented. The starting point for this practical application is eagerness to learn or “quick to listen.” The English word “listen” or “hear” that is used in various translations doesn’t really capture the intent of the Greek word which carries the idea of “harken” or “pay attention” or “take it to heart.” So much of what we hear with our physical ears, never get into our minds and much of what does make it to our minds does not get into our hearts. You’ve heard the expression “in one ear and out the other.” This description likely applies to the great majority of what we hear. Even if the information gets recorded in our minds, it is still a long way off from being accepted as something that is going to influence what we do.

The second way for this philosophy to express itself is in what we say. Sometimes people will try to practice the advice of being slow to speak by not speaking at all. The caution is that we should speak only after having given thoughtful consideration to the situation. Many times, we will speak from preconceived ideas and will jump to a conclusion about a situation

before knowing the facts. This may be why “listening” was placed before “speaking” in the list that James gave us.

The Bible reminds us in many places that God is slow to anger. Since this is true, then we would behave as God does if we too are going to be “slow to anger.” The psychologists of today tell us we should not keep our angry feelings pent up inside of us. They say we should vent our feelings to have good mental health. There is a better way: don’t get angry at all. When angry feelings and resentment start to build, then it is up to us to recognize that the trials of life are really for our eventual good. If we truly count it all joy when problems start, then we won’t have much room for anger or wrath in our lives. The little petty things won’t get to us. We can save our righteous indignation for those things that are truly important issues.

If James’ advice of “quick to learn, slow to speak, slow to anger” is applied in reference to the Word of God, then we could say that we should be eager to know God’s intent for our lives and not protest those plans nor become resentful about how things have worked out. If we pay attention to the Word and not listen to our own opinion about what we should do, then we will get rid of thoughts and actions that are not pleasing to God and we will allow the Holy Spirit to work the Word into the very fabric of our being so that we are transformed into the image of Christ.

Act on God’s Word

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 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--he will be blessed in what he does. James 1:22-25 NIV

Jesus told a parable about two brothers whose father told them to go work in the vineyard. Both of them understood what he said and what he wanted. One brother readily agreed to get right to work and the other brother refused to go. Eventually, the one that agreed to work found something else to do and the son that refused went out and worked all day in the vineyard. Jesus said that it was obvious which son was pleasing to his father. The Word of God places much emphasis on turning what we know to be "the right thing to do" into "doing the right thing.”

This admonition from James is very similar to what Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount. He used the illustration of building a house on the sand versus building it on a rock. If we simply hear the word of God and even agree that it is truth and yet nothing is affected in our lives, then hearing it and agreeing with it is useless. We are simply fooling ourselves. Part of our problem is that we can be easily stirred into wanting to do something about a situation while we are listening to a motivational speaker; however, if no real change happens deep down inside, then we quickly forget all the good things we thought we were going to do. I like James' example of looking into a mirror and then quickly forgetting as we walk away from the mirror. How many times have you seen a person check out his appearance in a mirror? He (or she) will straighten up, shoulders back, suck in their stomach, maybe even smile and then as soon as they walk away, they are slouching and frowning. Sometimes our resolve to do better lasts about that long. If we lived in a room full of mirrors so that we could see ourselves all the time, then we might smile more, have better posture and keep our weight in check.

The word of God must be a mirror for us. As we read the word, we can see our lives in comparison to what the word says. We may think about areas that could be straightened up and put into better agreement with the word and then we close the book, go out into the world and

don't think about it until we read that particular passage again. If we really had the word of God in our hearts, and God has promised to write it on our hearts, then it would be like living in a room full of mirrors. When we did something (or even thought about it), then there would be the Holy Spirit holding up the word of God so that we could see whether or not we are in agreement with it.

In the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Walvoord makes the following observation: To look into the mirror of the Word of God involves an obligation. One must look **intently into the perfect Law that gives freedom**. The intent and sustained look with a ready response is the key to spiritual strength and continued maturity. The word for "looks intently into" (*parakypsas*) literally means "to stoop down" in order to have a good close look. The "Law that gives freedom" seems like a paradox. Law seems to imply restraint and therefore a lack of freedom. Not so with God's Law. His perfect Law provides true freedom. "Hold to My teaching," Christ said, "then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). One who does what God decrees will find full liberty and **will be blessed in what he does**.

The Bible is full of great promises and many Christians are missing them because we are forgetful hearers and do not practice (do) what we know we ought to do.

Applying God's Word

James gives some practical examples from daily living where we might do a quick check as to how we are doing.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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. James 1:26-27 NIV

If we can't control what we say, then perhaps we ought to do some examining of what is in our hearts. Jesus told us that "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." James characterized religion that does not result in a changed heart that leads to a controlled tongue as "empty" or vain.

Visiting the fatherless and widows is typical of the activities that will be considered at the Great White Throne judgment. Did we visit those in prison, those that were sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc? Notice that James includes these things in the same list that points out that we should have purity in our lives - keep ourselves unspotted from the world. This list of activities is not intended to be exhaustive and just because you find a person doing such things does not, in any way, prove that person is a Christian. Christians certainly should be doing these kinds of things. Notice what James is telling us that we need a balance of the Social Gospel and Personal Piety. Many times we find people concentrating on one or the other - we really need both.

A good summary of what James is telling us can be found in *The New Bible Commentary* by D. A. Carson. He said

One can tell truly godly people by their lifestyle. If people have uncontrolled tongues (and so are often exploding in anger or quarreling), all of their religious practices are worthless. They really do not love God in their hearts. The type of piety which God looks for has two characteristics, which are the two sides of the same coin. First, it cares for the poor (the orphans and widows are two of the four major categories of the poor in the OT). Secondly, it is not *polluted by the world*, which means that it is not seeking security or advancement in terms of what is valued by people in the world. Because it does not love the world, there is no need to hold on to money. Therefore such people can be generous and give freely.

Something to Think About

These activities - these things to do - that James has mentioned relate to what we (as individuals) do out in the world. The same principles must also apply in the Church and its activities. So often I read the Bible and my focus is on what God wants me to do as a believer. I

don't normally think in terms of how does this or should this apply to the body of believers. When we fail to make this connection, then we wind up with a worship service of activities that exalt those who "perform" rather than exalt Jesus. We have activities and rituals that are pleasing and even entertaining to us as observers and participants. The net result in many cases is that it would not make a lot of difference if we thought about God or not. We could be attending a motivational meeting to inspire us to be better individuals and not see a lot of difference on what we do as a result of having been there. It is even more difficult to see that the impact of what we learn and of our coming together is doing anything to motivate the body of believers to act in unity and with common purpose.