

## **Obedience is the Test of Genuine Christianity (James 1:19-27)**

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Testing for the COVID-19 virus has been a hot topic in the news the last few months. Most of the stories focus on who's getting tested and how many tests have come back positive. What the newspaper I read most mornings has yet to say is exactly how the COVID-19 test works. So I looked it up and here's what I read in a CDC testing guide for US laboratories:

*"RNA isolated and purified from upper and lower respiratory specimens is reverse transcribed to cDNA and subsequently amplified in the Applied Biosystems 7500 Fast Dx Real-Time PCR Instrument with SDS version 1.4 software. In the process, the probe anneals to a specific target sequence located between the forward and reverse primers. During the extension phase of the PCR cycle, the 5' nuclease activity of Taq polymerase degrades the probe, causing the reporter dye to separate from the quencher dye, generating a fluorescent signal."*

I'm sure some of you biochem folks out there know exactly what they're talking about. For the vast majority of us, however, I might as well be speaking gibberish. I'm glad there is a defining biological mark of some kind that someone has or doesn't have the virus, but I don't entirely understand what it is, and it would take a lot of studying to figure it out.

Such is not the case with Christianity, friends. Genuine Christianity doesn't just have a defining mark, an identifying characteristic, but the defining mark is easily understandable and readily visible. And you don't need an advanced degree to make sense of the results. James 1:19-27 teaches us that the defining mark of genuine Christianity is persistent obedience of the Word of God. Hear the Word of the Lord:

*"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."*

James concludes the previous section of his letter in verse 18 by directing our attention to the greatest good and perfect gift God has ever given us – the gift of spiritual life through the power of the gospel. "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."



Spiritual life, intimate relationship with God born and all the blessings therein, isn't something we create for ourselves. It's something God creates within us through the person and work of Christ. No one brings themselves forth as a Christian for the same reason no one brings themselves forth from a morgue. Only Jesus can take our spiritually dead hearts and make them alive, opening our eyes to see his glory and granting the gift of faith in him.

When that happens, Christian, you become a "firstfruits," a living example of the redemption and renewal that will eventually encompass the entire cosmos. As the Apostle Paul declares, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). That's both a description of who you already are in Christ by virtue of his work in you and a summons to live accordingly.

Throughout the book of James, "my beloved brothers" usually signals a transition to a new topic. We discover as much in verse 19. But there's an implicit connection between this section and the previous one. In verse 19 James begins to answer the question verse 18 raises: what does life as a new creation, becoming what we already are in Christ, practically look like in the trenches of real life?

He gives a variety of answers in verses 19-27, but they all gather around a unifying principle. Living as a new creation means persistently obeying the Word of God. It's what separates those who are spiritually alive from those who are spiritually dead, distinguishing true Christians from cultural pretenders. Persistent obedience of the Word is the defining mark of genuine Christianity. James drives that point home by making three arguments about the nature of God's Word and our response to it.

### **1) THE RIGHTEOUSNESS SALVATION REQUIRES IS PRODUCED BY GOD'S WORD**

Did you notice the very first area James points to in verse 19 as an example of how a new creation in Christ lives? It's not preaching God's Word to millions or giving away all your money to the poor. It's the words that come out of your mouth. I warned you James would get into your business. Well, here he goes. "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger."

All three are expressions of humility in our relationship with other people. "Quick to hear" speaks to what we should be most eager to do in conversations. It's called being a good listener. Working hard to understand. Asking good questions. Not interrupting and or spending the time they're talking coming up with what you're going to say next to demolish the utter irrationality of their argument. Combined with "slow to speak," it means we choose, in humility, to be more concerned with understanding their perspective than we are with communicating our own.

How about the admonition to be "slow to anger"? It's tied in with our speech because many of our expressions of anger are verbal. Some kinds of anger are good. Being angry over injustice,



for example, is a very good thing if what compels and controls our anger is a jealousy for God's honor. But we know from verse 20 that the kind of anger James has in mind here isn't good anger. It's sinful anger. It's not the anger of God. It's "the anger of man." It's the anger we display when we lash out at our kids, rant on social media, or insult a sibling or coworker, attempting to make them pay for hurting us.

Now being "slow to anger" doesn't mean all of that is fine as long as we heat up slowly. It means not being quick-tempered. Practicing self-control. Proverbs 29:11, "A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back." Why is that so important? Look at verse 20. Humility in our speech, being slow to anger, matters because all our quick-tempered and sinful expressions of anger governed by the flesh do not produce "the righteousness of God." They don't produce godliness in an ethical sense.

Ok, but why is that such a big deal? No one's perfect, right? Friend, producing "the righteousness of God," practicing godliness in our speech could not be more important because our salvation depends on it. Our final salvation depends on whether we "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8) and "strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Jesus' warning in Matthew 12:36 should get your attention. "On the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

Giving free reign to gossip, slander, cursing, boasting, innuendo, manipulation, every kind of speech that tears down instead of building up, isn't just "wrong" or "unwise," it paves the way to divine judgment and condemnation. So what will produce "the righteousness of God" that leads to salvation?

Keep in mind it is the righteousness "of God." The standard isn't other people or the guy with the worst temper you know. The standard is God himself. The pattern of our speech must reflect his own. And what God has spoken is, in fact, the key to all our growth and change. Look at verse 21.

First, we must put off all "filthiness and rampant wickedness." That means repenting, or choosing to turn away, from ungodliness, which in the context of verse 19 points especially to filthiness or wickedness in our speech. Second, we must "receive with meekness the implanted word..." What's the implanted word? It's the "word of truth" in verse 18 that brought us spiritual life in the first place! It's the word of the gospel, the good news of all Jesus has done to save us from sin and death. And not just the historical facts of the gospel, but also all the implications of the gospel.

When you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit takes the word of God, starting with the gospel, and writes it on your heart (Jeremiah 31:33), making you awake and alive to all the Word reveals about God's character and ways. Things the Bible says that you heard before start



making sense. You're no longer just reading words on a page. You're seeing the goodness and beauty of Jesus. God's Word, the self-revelation of his glory, is "implanted" in your heart.

But does that mean we've worked out all the implications of God's Word for every area of life, speech included? No. That's a lifelong process the Bible calls being "sanctified" or becoming more like Jesus. And that process happens as we continue to "receive" the Word, which means continuing to embrace, trust, and obediently work out all of its implications.

For example, what will deliver you from verbally retaliating against a family member when they hurt you? Choosing to "receive" Romans 12:19 by trusting God to vindicate you! "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"

What will free you from berating or manipulating your spouse into heeding your counsel? Choosing to "receive" Philippians 1:6 by trusting that the whole process of their growth and change is ultimately God's work, not yours! "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

What will enable you to stop boasting or selfishly talking all about your life and your accomplishments to your friends and instead take a genuine interest in how they're doing and how you can care for them? Choosing to "receive" Mark 10:45 by meditating on the wonder that God himself, the most glorious being in the entire universe, did exactly that for you! "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Friends, it's the "implanted word," centered on the truth and implications of the gospel, which alone is able (verse 21) to "save your souls." God's Word does the work. God's Word has the power. God will use his Word to help you grow in godliness, speech included, readying you for salvation on the coming day of judgment.

But we must choose to receive it. Merely posting "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" on your bathroom mirror won't change you. You have to receive God's Word by choosing to relate to him in light of who he has revealed himself to be. Then and only then will the Word begin to transform you from the inside out. As Douglass Moo says, "Both the gracious initiative of God and the grateful response of human beings are necessary aspects of the gospel."

The righteousness salvation requires is produced by God's Word. And in that struggle, that spiritual battle, there lies a great danger, a risk that looms larger the longer you've followed Jesus. And that is the danger of thinking that we've "received" the Word simply because we have heard it or know what it says.

## **2) RECEIVING GOD'S WORD MEANS PERSISTENTLY OBEYING GOD'S WORD**



To all the parents out there, especially parents of young boys, have you ever surveyed their disheveled clothing, bird's nest of a hairdo, or food on their face and said, "Son, did you look at yourself in the bathroom mirror when you were in there a minute ago?" What's the classic response? "Yeah, Dad. Is something wrong?" To which I find myself saying, "Hmm...where should I begin?"

It's possible to look at yourself in a mirror, as James says in verse 24, go away, and immediately forget what you saw and need to do in response. You don't wash. You don't shave. You don't pluck the large hair growing out of your nose. For all intents and purposes, looking in the mirror has no effect on your actions. And that, James says, is exactly what we're like when we hear God's Word but fail to put it into practice.

Verse 22, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourself." No one likes to be deceived, right? And yet it is incredibly easy to deceive ourselves, to convince ourselves we're a genuine Christian when we're actually not. How do we do that? When we think we're good with God because we go to church, know the Bible, and can give all the right answers. You might even pride yourself on being "doctrinally informed" unlike all the sad species of Christians out there who have yet to learn the finer points of reformed theology.

Here's a question, friend. When was the last time you read God's Word or listened to a sermon and experienced the gift of the conviction of sin? When that happened, how did you respond? "Oh, that's convicting. Great point, Pastor." Did you write down what you heard and pray for God's help to change? Did you share where you sensed the Lord challenging you to grow with your spouse or a close friend and ask them to pray for you and hold you accountable? How about if I walked into your living room right now and asked, "How have you grown or how have you been fighting to grow as a Christian over the last few months?" Would you have anything to say?

The command in verse 21 to "receive with meekness" or receive with humility the Word of God requires two actions on our part. First, we have to look into the perfect mirror of God's word, asking the Lord as David did in Psalm 139:23, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!"

That is a prayer God will always answer, friend. The nature of his Word, applied to our souls by the power of the Spirit, guarantees as much. Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

That won't happen automatically. We have to be willing to look. We have to read the Word, listen to the Word, and think about not just what it says, but the claim it makes on our life as a result of what it says. How does this verse, this chapter, this sermon, call me to think, feel, or act differently? Why is that necessary? Because merely looking into the mirror of Scripture and



seeing what is true doesn't change anyone. We must then choose, second, to apply what we have seen by fighting to actually think, feel, and act accordingly.

Remember, the Lord did not inspire his Word to inform you. He inspired his Word to transform you. He could care less about how much you "know" is true. Even the demons believe God is one and shudder. What matters, and what they refuse to do along with every sinner who remains opposed to the priorities and purposes of God for their life, is being faithful to obey.

And not just here or there, or when it's convenient, or when we feel like, or when someone else makes us, but willfully and persistently. Verse 25, "But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."

Why does James call God's Word the law of liberty? Many people think true liberty is unfettered individual freedom to do whatever your heart desires, no strings attached. The Bible says, however, that's not liberty at all. That's slavery. You're enslaved to the shifting and contradictory passions within you. In a broken and fallen world, that's a disaster in the making. True freedom, real liberty, is freedom from slavery to your natural desires so that you can become who God created you to be.

God's Word is "the law of liberty" in the sense that it reveals the depth of our sin, our need for a Savior, and God's provision in Jesus. It sends us running to the cross where we discover, to our eternal joy, full forgiveness and triumph over the power of sin and death. It announces deliverance from the kingdom of darkness and sets free to love and follow Jesus. And then it marks out the path of obedience to our new master, which we quickly discover is the path of joy, life, and peace.

Why? Because we're living the way we were created to live, like a cheetah set free from a miserable cage to run on the plains of Africa. Proverbs 12:28, "In the path of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death." Think of it this way. The gospel is not freedom from obedience; it's freedom for obedience. It's the happy announcement of liberty from the sin that so easily entangles that we might live to please the Lord. And that, my friends, is the secret to joy, which is why James confidently says the "doer who acts...will be blessed in his doing."

So don't deceive yourself, friend. If your life does not reflect a pattern of obedience to God's Word, you're not a Christian. Those in whom the Word has been implanted, and those who continue to receive it, are careful and persistent in doing what they have heard. Hearing doesn't change anyone. It's necessary, but the transformation is in the doing. Indeed, it's the doing that reveals whether you really heard in the first place.

So how can you know whether you're a hearer who forgets or a doer who acts? If receiving God's Word means persistently obeying God's Word, how can you tell if you're obeying? James helps us in verses 26-27.

### **3) OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD IS STRIKINGLY VISIBLE**

In verse 26, James reaches back to the warning in verse 19 against the absence of self-control in our speech. What does he say? "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless" It's not genuine Christianity. It's a sham.

So what's the alternative? What does faithfulness to obey God's Word look like? Self-control in our speech, controlling our tongue the way a rider controls a horse, is the first example, and James gives us two more in verse 27. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, orphans and widows lived in utter deprivation – socially and economically – absent outside intervention. They didn't have a government safety net. They didn't have a foster care system or social security. They were completely on their own. Isn't that interesting James makes a beeline for how we relate to the most weak and helpless members of our society?

When we think of really "religious" people, exemplary Christians who do mighty exploits in God's kingdom, we think of missionaries who move across the world, evangelists who preach to millions, or maybe even a pastor who does "full time" ministry and doesn't have to bother with a "secular" vocation. James points to quiet, unnoticed, and persistent acts of compassion, loving people who have no little to no ability to "do" anything for you in return. Loving people like Jesus did.

Compassion isn't an optional trait, brothers and sisters. It's not a "spiritual gift" God gives the church deacons so the rest of us can applaud their heroism. Christ-like love for the weak and vulnerable is one of the key tests of genuine Christianity. It includes specific care for orphans and widows as God gives you opportunity, but it also manifests itself countless contexts where you choose to sacrificially love someone who is weak or lonely by giving them the gift of your presence, you "visit" them, and through the inevitable messiness of personal relationship, you remind them that God sees them, God is with them, and God cares for them.

I thank the Lord for how many of you have done just that over the last 8 weeks during the coronavirus outbreak. You've moved toward the weak and vulnerable. For that, I commend you! Keep doing that, my friends. Keep doing that in your family. Keep doing that in your neighborhood. Verse 27 isn't about the folks who serve in Open Table or the Food Pantry ministries at KingsWay. It's about a lifestyle of active, personal compassion.

The final and equally visible example of obeying God's Word is our relationship to the world, which Dan McCartney helpfully defines as the "human environment standing in opposition to God." It's a theme James will come back to again and again. It's not just the sinful desires in our



own hearts that get us in trouble. It's the air we breathe that urges us to find our joy in the acquisition of possessions, to discover our true selves through sexual experimentation, or to conclude that love means never saying anything that offends anyone.

The culture we live in affects our souls more than we realize. Unless we remain vigilant, thinking carefully about how what the world tells us to do compares to what God's Word calls us to do, we will inevitably become corrupted, spiritually stained and eventually destroyed through the influence of companions known and unknown who dismiss the backward and constraining irrelevance of fearing the Lord.

In the Christian environment in which I grew up, we talked a lot about the importance of being different, of not buying into the world's way of doing anything, of humbly and courageously choosing to run hard in the path of God's commands. At risk of generalization, I fear the tide has shifted. While worldliness is by no stretch a young person's problem, I hear far more young people today preoccupied and even "boasting" about how much they are "in" the world in contrast to all those legalistic Christians of old who circled the wagons and watched Veggie Tales until they were 18.

Young man, young woman, how "wise" you are in the ways of the world is no cause for boasting. It may score you some points with a few non-Christian friends. But I warn you. You will gain their approval at the cost of your soul. No one can serve two masters. You can't love the world and love God. Must we remain "in" the world in order to love the world the way God does? Yes. But if remaining "in" the world causes you to progressively resemble the world more than Jesus then you have abandoned God's mission for your own.

I charge you as does James: Don't say you're obeying God if your affections, your priorities, and your companions look no different than anyone else in the world. Obedience of God's Word is strikingly visible – in our speech, in the way we move toward the weak and helpless, and in our diligence to keep ourselves unstained from the world.

## **CONCLUSION**

The defining mark of genuine Christianity is persistent obedience of the Word of God. I challenge you to go to the Lord in prayer right now, to ask him to search your heart, and show you where you need to grow in being a "doer" and not just a "hearer." It could be in one of the areas I've already mentioned. It could be a different part of your life. Don't be a hearer who forgets. Be a doer who acts – not by pulling yourself up by your own spiritual bootstraps, but by receiving the Word – reading it, meditating on it, and applying it – for it alone has the power to produce the righteousness of God.