

## *Is Your Religion Any Good?*

James 1: 5-8, 22-27

**First Presbyterian Church  
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*Is your religion any good?* That's the kind of in your face question I hear underlying the first chapter of James. He's a writer with a sharp edge, a preacher who never gets too chummy with his congregation. But he keeps that edge because he loves them. He's a man who learned how to call his brother Lord and Christ. And not because his older brother Jesus picked him up and threatened to cook him in the fire—not that my older brother would know anything about that....James had lived through the humbling experience of recognizing that competing with his brother would only ruin him. He accepted the truth that the sibling with whom he had grown up was the Son of God in the flesh. If James could come to terms with the presence of Christ in the world and find in him the living waters, then his readers could too. But he knows it will take some serious adjustment.

A man like James had been seared with the truth. He didn't have time for pretending, for spirituality as a hobby. James had been tested in the fire, until the fat was burned off and he was a lean, supple servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, a man he had once known merely as brother. But now what he knew of Jesus was a matter of life and death. It had to hold the weight of real life. This is what he wants to know, "Is your religion worth the bulletin it's printed on?" It's interesting that he even uses that word we translate as "religion." He's referring to the outward practice of service to God. It's only used five times in the New Testament, and three of those times are here in James 1. James is making an inquiry about the form and expression of our faith.

Now James' whole book strikes with quick reversals. His thoughts make hair-pin turns. At any moment he will overturn conventional wisdom, knocking it upside down. Remember that last week we considered James' opening words, "Consider it all joy my friends when you face trials of many kinds." James told us that suffering, rather than producing a lack in us--which is what we feel in the moment-- leads under God's care to a fulfillment in which we lack nothing. For trials lead to an endurance that so deepens character that in the end we are not emptied by the trial but filled up. In God's hands, pain can become an instrument of grace. God is at work in us in the midst of life's trials.

Maybe James knew how strange his logic might sound to people under stress. So he adds a sentence for those who might be scratching their heads at considering the joy in suffering. He says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." In other words, God doesn't mind if we raise our hands during the classroom of life, and ask, "Could you please explain how you're working in the midst of this?" For we may indeed wonder how the events of life can connect with God's purposes for us. We wonder at the meaning of what has happened. We want to see how some good can possibly come out of terrible loss. Is our religion any good when someone turns on the blender and begins mixing up our lives?

Ask God, says James, and he will show you. Ask, if you really want God to be at work in your life. Ask, if you're willing to be shaped by the reply God gives.

But be warned that such answers don't usually come in an instant. A long, patient relationship with God in which we study the Word and invite him to show us how he is involved in our lives will yield over time such wisdom. Our prayer, through the long days and longer nights is "God, help me make sense of this. Show me how I am to respond, how I can cooperate with what you are doing."

We may think we are used to the way the world is. But then we find that we are surprised again by the unending variety of misery and loss that can occur. Another terrorist act. A mysterious death in our neighborhood. Teenagers who lose their lives in cars. A sibling who dies from addiction. Suicide. Health setbacks. Car bombings. Vacant places in the pews. A marriage falling apart that we never suspected was even in trouble. Life is so fragile, and our candles are blown out in an instant. In the next breath, even the strongest may be taken away. We are all frail and not one more hour is guaranteed. So we pray, "God, we lack the wisdom to make the connection between what has happened and what your loving purposes are. Help us deal with this. Help us turn the question, gently, from "Why did this happen?" to "What am I to do now that such a loss has occurred?"

At the very least, at the very least, have we allowed such experiences to draw us up short for a moment in our mad dash to activities? We send each other away all day long, all week. We trade away yet another opportunity to have a meal together, thinking there is so much more time left. We spend the hours like we have an eternity to burn. It goes so fast. Are there conversations you've been postponing? Time you yearn to carve out? Words to be said, embraces, glances?

God grant us the wisdom not to let these passings be in vain for our families. God show us the meaning of the hour.

Now James wants us to ask even in these situations the question underlying his letter, “Is my religion any good?” What good is your religion? In the face of suffering, does it do any good for you to be a Christian? Are you any good to others because you’re a believer? Is God pleased with your religion?

The answer that runs through James’ little book is that if we’re only half into it, then our religion is probably no good at all. That’s what he means when he says we should ask for wisdom, for the connection between God and our lives, without doubt. I don’t think he means that we are never to have a question, or wonder if all this is really true. James wants us to hear that when we throw in our lot wholeheartedly with God, then he will show us his love in the midst of even the worst circumstances. But if we’re hedging our bets, only dabbling with God, we should not expect the depth of his presence, and the balm of his peace to come.

The truth is, most of us have been pretty well inoculated against Christianity. We can spend an hour at church and leave unscathed. You’ve learned by now how to listen to my sermons without any damage being done to your daily life. Professor Charles Partee of Pittsburgh Seminary used to compare preaching to a wrestling match. After a while, a congregation learns the moves a preacher makes, like a familiar opponent in a wrestling match. Eventually, a congregation can go twenty minutes with its preacher and never risk being pinned. Of course preachers, too, have learned how to prepare sermons without letting God pin them. We can handle the Word of God week after week as if we were wearing spiritual latex gloves. When the service is over we peel off the gloves and breathe a sigh of relief—no threatening skin to skin contact was made. Is our religion any good?

We are double-minded, double-hearted, wanting it both ways. If the truth be known, we’d like God to be the icing on the cake, the accent to the lives we’ve chosen for ourselves. Amidst prosperity and the pleasant whirring of daily activity that keeps us occupied, we’d like to add a dash of God to give us some joy, maybe a sense of blessing. We offer our occasional thanks and hope that when things get dodgy, God will give us a bit of peace. Such people, says James, should not expect to receive anything from the Lord.

James is relentless in his direct simplicity. God is not just the optional spiritual accent on our lives. He is the heart and soul of who we are. Don’t just listen to the Word. Do it! James says that those who listen to the Word but don’t

do what it says are like people who look in the mirror to see what they look like, but when they leave the mirror they immediately forget who they are. We see, we hear but no word penetrates to our depths. For if the word enters the depths, James said it becomes an implanted seed which grows to fruitful action.

In more contemporary language, James reminds me how much I'm like a nonstick pan. The most glorious words about Christ smack against me, and then just slip right off. My religion is no good when I'm no different than anyone else in the world. I'm playing both sides. As I've said before, I want to be the first person to successfully serve both God and mammon. History is not on my side. Double-minds and double-hearts lead to a Christianity that is worthless.

So here is James' bracing solution. He writes, "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." Do you want a faith that matters? A religion that works? Look after orphans and widows in their distress, and keep free from the stain of the world.

Could it possibly be that simple? Do good things? Everyone in this room does good things. We're a church known for our deeds of compassion. But we know that we can act without it actually touching us. Good deeds in themselves may not affect the doers. What is James driving at?

Let's take it deeper. Of all the areas of need in the world and all the possibility for works of charity, why would James pick looking after widows and orphans in their distress? How can this be a cure for my double-minded, double-hearted pretend spirituality?

Look closely at these people. What does the widow have to say to us about what matters in life? Would she trade her house, her closet full of clothes, her membership in the club, her address for another hour with the husband she loved who worked himself to death? In a heartbeat. The grieving know in the tears what matters.

Ask the child who's an orphan because his mother is an alcoholic and his father is usually gone because he can't stand to be in the house. Is the goal of life really figuring out how you can go skiing the maximum number of times in a year, how you can get to as many concerts, or games, or dinners? Do all those thrills fill the ache in the heart? What would he trade for a mother who blessed him instead of cursing him? What would he give for one day of seeing her eyes clear and

hearing her voice steady as she held him like a mother should and told him she loves him? If it's not too late, if you could still get beneath the anger that the boy wears as a protective shield, you'd hear the truth. He'd give up everything for love.

What's in the hearts of parents when they realize too late that their children have slipped away from them? The time has run out. The hearts are closed. No more Saturdays, no more chances to listen, no more invitations to love. The child is gone now and the parents are orphans. What does the good life, the busy life, the climbing life taste like? Like ashes.

The world dangles trinkets before us. We grasp at them. This distraction; that acquisition. This trip, that dinner. This hour of neglect. Pretty trinkets of purchases and thrilling trinkets of deals that give us a rush of power. And our religion isn't worth spit. Because to the double-hearted, and double-minded, God appears to be anemic. Not worth the trouble. The god of the church is weak and pitiable, an adornment to those living the good life. Who wants it?

James has us now. Yes, our religion stinks. Our experience of God is more guilt than empowerment, more duty than fulfillment, more ornament than substance. My heart is hungry and my soul is empty, and I don't know what to make of still another tragic, untimely death. I can't find God.

"Go look after the widows and orphans who are in distress," says James. Go to the place where all that is unimportant is burned off in the fire of loss. Go where the anger at the wounds of absence is raw and frightening. See what matters. Remember your God. The one who came among us and looked at us with eyes wide open until his heart broke in compassion. Go to them with his love. Sit and listen. Love. Go home to your loved ones. Get rid of superficial piety.

Is your religion any good? If it's not, that's not because God is no good. Let's be done with double-hearts and playing both sides of the fence. I don't want to be remembered by people saying, "Well, he took a lot of trips." Or, "Didn't he have a lot of toys?" I want to be part of a church full of people of whom it may be said, "Didn't they love? Didn't they go right to the tearful places, the broken streets, the sharp edges and care?" I want people to say of First Presbyterian Church, "Those people serve a living God. They belong to him first, last and always. You can see it by the way they worship. You can see it by the way they love. Their religion matters."