

The Behavior of Belief - 3
James 1:19-27

1

Introduction

Just as there are three elements to hearing and receiving the Word (with submission, purity, and humility), so there are also three elements to obeying the Word. The true believer, the hearer and doer of the Word, proves his faith in three ways: In relation to himself, he is willing to apply the Word without deception (1:22b–26); in relation to others, he is willing to apply the Word without selfishness (v. 27a); and in relation to the world, he is willing to apply the Word without compromise (v. 27b). Last week we looked at having a willingness to apply the word without deception.

2

James 1:19-27

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; ²⁰ for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. ²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. ²⁵ But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. ²⁶ If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion *is* useless. ²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

3

Willingness to Receive the Word Without Selfishness

James 1:27

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The second proper reaction to the Word of God is the willingness to apply it to one's life without selfishness, with genuine concern for the welfare of others, especially those in great need. "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is" to serve them with love and compassion. Jesus said, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). James declares that true believers will show their love and compassion by "visiting orphans and widows in their trouble".

The words "pure" and "undefiled" are synonyms. "Pure" emphasizes cleanliness while "undefiled" speaks of "freedom from contamination". James is not arguing from what might seem best to the church, the world, or us. He is stating that this is what is best in the sight of God.

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The genuineness of anyone's religion is not determined by his or her own qualifications or standards but by God's. The greatest spiritual mistake of the scribes, Pharisees, and other Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus was on this point. They replaced God's standards in the Law with their own man-made traditions. Of such men Jesus said, "Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me'" (Matt. 15:6b–8).

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"To visit," means more than a casual chat over a cup of coffee. It carries the ideas of caring for others, exercising oversight on their behalf, and of helping them in whatever way is needed.

It has the same root word with is translated "bishop" in 1 Timothy 3:2 and carries the idea of "shepherding" or "overseer". The word here in James is used frequently in the New Testament of God's visiting His people in order to help, strengthen, and encourage them (Luke 1:68, 78; 7:16; Acts 15:14; Heb. 2:6).

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Jesus, in His teaching on the judgment of separating of the sheep and goats, used the word to describe those who truly belong to and love Him, saying, “For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” (Matt. 25:35–36). All of these ways of ministering could be included under this term “to visit”. To visit in a way that is pleasing to our God and Father is to meet as best we can all the needs of orphans and widows and any others in their distress.

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Widows and orphans, they were usually the neediest people in the early church. There were no life insurance policies, and no welfare programs. Jobs for women or children were scarce and if they had no close kin or benefactor to take care of them, they would fall into the most extreme poverty.

The principle behind this passage can be applied to anyone in need. Because such people without parents and husbands are unable to reciprocate in any way, caring for them reveals true sacrificial love.

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God has always had special concern for orphans and widows and has commanded His people to reflect that same concern. David affirmed that “A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation.” (Ps. 68:5). The Mosaic Law included the instruction, “You shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child” (Ex. 22:22), and, “At the end of every third year you shall bring out the tithe of your produce of that year and store it up within your gates. And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.” (Deut. 14:28–29)

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Loving, selfless service to others, especially fellow believers, is also a New Testament theme. Paul gave the command to “honor widows that are widows indeed” (1 Tim. 5:3), which included bestowing financial and any other help that was needed. John declares that if we know God we will demonstrate that relationship by our love one to another (1 John 2:10–11; 3:10–11, 14, 16; 4:7–12).

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True Christianity is manifested from a pure and loving heart by the way believers talk and by the way they act. It is manifested by how they love and care for those who are in need, not by how they love and care for those they prefer, those who are close to them, or those with whom they share common traits and interests. Love is to be the central and most visible manifestation of salvation. John makes it clear that love for God cannot be separated from love for others, especially for fellow believers and most especially for those who are in distress. A truly redeemed heart reaches out to others (cf. Matt. 5:43–48; John 13:34–35).

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“To keep” indicates regular, continuous action. In other words, keeping oneself unspotted from the world is the perpetual obligation of Christians, allowing for no exceptions. Those who belong to God are to be characterized by moral and spiritual purity, by unspotted and unblemished holiness. Peter admonishes believers to “conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:17b–19).

Neither James nor Peter is speaking of sinless perfection. That spiritual condition was manifested solely by Jesus in His incarnation. The writer of Ecclesiastes states, “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin” (Eccles. 7:20).

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Every Christian falls short of the Lord's standards. Like Paul, we find ourselves doing things we know are wrong and not doing things we know are right (cf. Rom. 7:14–25). Even the most faithful and loving believer does not always show as much compassion as he should, love his fellow believers as he should, or love God as he should. James is speaking of the basic orientation of our lives, of our central commitment and allegiance. If that allegiance is right, then our deepest desire will be to love and care for others and to confess our selfish sin to the Lord when we do not. It is not our perfection that proves our salvation but rather our hating our imperfections and seeking, with God's help and power, to correct them. In his inmost heart, the genuine Christian longs to speak and do only those things that are holy, pure, loving, honest, truthful, and upright, things that are uncorrupted and unspotted by the world.

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The term "world" has the basic meaning of order, arrangement, and sometimes of adornment. In the New Testament it is used figuratively of the earth (see Matt. 13:35; John 21:25) and the universe (see 1 Tim. 6:7; Heb. 4:3; 9:26). But most often it is used to represent fallen mankind in general and its ungodly spiritual systems of philosophy, morals, and values (see John 7:7; 8:23; 14:30; 1 Cor. 2:12; Gal. 4:3; Col. 2:8). That is the sense in which James uses the term in the present text.

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With that meaning of world obviously in mind, John warns, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.” (1 John 2:15–16). Love of God and love of the world and the things of the world are totally incompatible and mutually exclusive. The phrase “the things of the world” does not pertain to such things as participating in business, being involved in social activities, or buying and using the material necessities of life. It is the overriding love of and allegiance to such things that are ungodly and come between men and God.

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Godly religion, that is, Biblical Christianity, is a matter of holy obedience to God’s Word — reflected, among other ways, by our honesty in regard to ourselves, by our selflessness in regard to the needs of others, and by our uncompromising moral and spiritual stand in regard to the world.

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So What ...

As Christians we claim that our lives are based upon Christ and His Word. Yet are we willing to truly receive and obey Christ's commands without argument or hesitation? We need to fall in love with the author of Scripture. When we love Him more than anything else, then obedience and holiness will be our delight.