

Pure Religion

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Date: 17 February 2013

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[0 : 00] Well, please sit down. Well, friends, today I want to begin this talk by telling you about two experiences that I've had in two different churches.

My first experience comes from an unnamed church. You'll understand why in a moment. An unnamed church in Queensland, a long distance away, so I'm reasonably safe. And a long time ago.

It was a church that was known for its ministry to students at the time. And I was urged that it was a good church and that I should go along. And so I took the advice because it's good to see I was working with university students at the time.

And it was good to see what might be happening in the churches that students went along to. I went along to one evening service. The service was two hours long. The first hour was taken up with singing.

The second hour was divided into three 20-minute segments. The first 20-minute segment was devoted to notices. You're already thankful, aren't you?

[1 : 06] The second 20-minute segment was devoted to a group of people who'd gone from the church to do the great thing of building a church building up in Papua New Guinea.

The third 20-minute segment was given over to another block of singing. Let me tell you that there was no Bible reading within the whole of the service.

There was no sermon or Bible talk. In fact, the only mention of the Bible in the two hours was in the missionary segment, which was quite telling, I think, because the person who was speaking told us that he wanted to tell us, read to us a verse from the Bible, but he'd forgotten his Bible and could not remember the verse itself.

I thought actually the whole service had forgotten the Bible. But anyway, the focus on this church, in this church, was very, very clear. It did not have to do with hearing God speak, because if it did have to do that, you would have somewhere, somehow squeezed it in, wouldn't you?

In fact, you would have allowed it to dominate. My second experience of church comes from my very first day at theological college. I was a Methodist, and I found myself in an Anglican theological college for reasons that, well, it would take a long time to explain.

[2 : 30] But anyway, here I was, a Methodist in an Anglican college, and it was a prayer book service. And as we moved through the service, I was astounded. It was called morning prayer, and it might as well have been called morning Bible reading, I think.

We started with some quotations from Scripture that told us why we were meeting. We then had a quotation from Scripture that told us about our need for the forgiveness of sins. We were then told that Scripture urged us to acknowledge our sin and repent.

We then confessed our sins, and an absolution was proclaimed that was based on Scripture that told us that God had forgiven us our sins. That was followed by the Lord's Prayer, the corporate reading of Psalm 95, a reading of an individual psalm, a reading from the Old Testament, a reading from the New Testament, a corporate reciting of the Song of Zechariah from Luke's Gospel, and so it went on.

And Cranmer, who was responsible for this particular service, had it right. He knew that you should spend most of your time listening to Scripture. From beginning to end, this service was saturated with Scripture, and an explanation, or an explanation of Scripture.

It was on hearing God speak from His Word. Friends, I want to begin today's exploration of James chapter 1 with a question that arises out of my experience of these two churches.

[3 : 58] And I want to ask, what it is that occupies the focus of our churches today? What is at the heart of our churches? What is their time spent on?

What is talked about in our churches? What is celebrated? What is prayed about? But let me repeat the question. What is it that occupies the focus of our churches today?

And I want to do this because I think that God has an opinion on this. And He tells us something about that opinion in James chapter 1. So turn with me to James chapter 1, verses 19 to 27.

Now, the first thing I want you to notice about this passage is that it has two foci. The first foci, or the first focus, is on us as individuals. You can see that in verse 19 because James talks about everyone, that is, every person.

You can see it in verse 23 when he talks about any person. The second focus, though, I think, is on congregational members. You can see that in verse 19 where he talks to the beloved or the brothers and sisters.

[5 : 02] And in the original, he does actually say that. He says brothers. So that's the very first thing. Now, this passage has, I think, a dual focus, us as individuals and us as congregations.

It is addressed to us both as individuals and as a corporate entity. The second thing I want you to notice is that this passage is not about hearing in general. You see, I actually think this passage is often misunderstood.

Let me explain. I think that when we read verse 19, we think it is about hearing in general. Have a look at verse 19 and you tell me what you think when you first read it.

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Nearly every one of us here reads that as being.

We should be quick to. Sorry, we should. We should be quick to listen to the person we are speaking to or speaking with and slow to anger and so on.

[6 : 03] But I'm not sure that that's exactly what it means. You see, look at verse 18. So flip back a verse and we read in verse 18, He chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.

Which word do you think he's talking about there? The word of truth. You see, it is the word of truth that gives birth. We heard earlier from Heather about someone receiving the gospel and responding to it.

But I think the word that he's talking about that we are to be quick to listen to is that word of truth. And then just to show you a little bit more, look at look at verse 22.

Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. My suspicion is and actually verse 21. Can you see there? Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. So what might it be that people in verse 19 are to listen to? I suspect it is to listen to the word of truth, the word implanted, which is able to save you.

[7 : 12] That, I think, is what you ought to be quick to listen to. Okay, now, if that is the case, then we might, through that, understand better the surrounding verses.

I think, in effect, what is being said is be quick to listen to the gospel. And that is our first task as Christians. It is a task of tremendous urgency.

We are to be engaged in it eagerly, seriously, resolutely. We are to be swift with it, quick to do it. And if we do this, then the consequences, I think, will be threefold.

We will be slow to anger, slow to speak, and we'll rid ourselves of all sordidness and moral filth and wickedness, which he goes on to talk about. So let's go through each one of those in detail and have a look at them.

Think about it for a moment. If you are quick to hear what God has done for you in the Lord Jesus Christ, what God has done in the gospel, one ramification will be, won't it, that you'll be very slow to speak.

[8 : 15] That is, you will listen to God before presuming to speak for him. You will not be arrogant or cocksure or glib.

You'll be humble in theological discussion and witness. For, you see, you'll find that we are not the supreme authority, but God is. We will let him have prominence.

We'll let his word be the primary word. Friends, please understand, I think it's very important here. We are to be quick to hear the word of the gospel, which will make us slow to speak our own opinion, won't it?

And slow to condemn. But also we'll be slow to anger. Let me think about it with you for a moment. If we are quick to hear what God has done in the gospel, a second ramification will be that we will be slow to anger, won't we?

You see, we won't forget because we'll remember all the time that God was angry with us and forgave us. That he set us right with him through the gospel.

[9 : 19] And if we have heard that, well, we'll be very slow to condemn others and be angry with others, won't we? Because God has forgiven us.

And any protested evil that we have will be as fellow sinners. When we see evil in other people, we'll remember that we too are evil. And we'll be slow to condemn them, very slow to be angry at them.

You see, as James goes on, you see, our anger will never achieve the righteousness of God. In other words, it's highly unlikely that the anger of us sinful human beings, sinful human men and women, even when we're Christians, is likely to fulfill the righteousness of God.

Isn't that so true, I think, of argument among Christians? Unfortunately, I think when we fight, we allow anger against the evildoer to sneak in.

And the end result is often injustice, isn't it? Our friends ask you as Christians. Me as Christian. Isn't that so true that it is so easy for our anger to go beyond righteous anger into judgment about others that doesn't match what we have heard in the gospel, that we are quick to retaliate, quick to respond in anger, when God himself has been slow to be angry at us?

[10 : 49] Friends, can you hear how if you hear the gospel, you will be not quick to anger? So, rather, those who hear the word of God and the gospel will have in mind the forgiveness of God that they have received, and they will accept and forgive, even as God has accepted and forgiven them.

They will have in mind, therefore, the relief of the wrongs, not the retaliation of the wrong or the infliction of retribution on the wrongdoer. Now, let's look back at verse 21, and James tells us to focus on the word of God, and as we do, as we are quick to hear the word of God and what God has done in the gospel, we will put aside moral filth or sordidness.

Now, the word here literally means dirt or filth, and it therefore comes to mean moral uncleanness, impurity, filthiness, filthiness, and the word for wickedness that is used here literally means an abundance of badness.

And what James is saying is that as we focus on what God has done for us in the gospel, we'll want to put aside the moral filth that we left behind us when we became Christians, when we heard how God hates such things and forgives such things in us.

What James is saying is that as we focus on hearing the gospel, we'll want to put aside those previous parts of our life. We'll say no to ungodliness. We'll strive instead for godliness.

[12 : 18] Can you hear what James is saying? He is describing the marks of one who rightly hears the gospel. Such a person will be slow to speak, slow to get angry with others, keen to turn away from ungodliness and toward godliness.

As we can see, this passage is in many ways like the parable of the sower. Do you remember the parable of the sower? Right hearing, according to Jesus, is allowing the word of God, the gospel, to do its work in our heart and in our life.

It is to receive that implanted word and let it take root and let it establish itself and let it bear fruit. 30, 60, even a hundredfold.

And it will result in the salvation of souls rather than the destruction of people. So that in mind, turn to verses 22 to 29. And as background to these, I'd like you to keep your finger in James and flip back to Matthew chapter 7.

Matthew 7. And I'm going to read from verse 21 to 27. In fact, have I got the right...

[13 : 34] Yes, no, I have got the right reference. So Matthew 7, 21 to 27. Read it with me. So not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you.

Go away from me, you evildoers. And everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock.

And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand, and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was its fall.

Now, I don't know about you, but every time I read those words, they are pretty scary, aren't they? I want you to notice, though, what Jesus is saying. Jesus is making it clear that it is very easy to be deceived.

[14:47] It is very easy to have the appearance of being Christian, but not be Christian at all. And that, I think, is what James is addressing. Look at what he says back in James, verse 22.

So back in James, verse 22, do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. James is clear. You see, he's talked about the hearing of the gospel, and now he makes sure and clear that Christianity is not just about hearing and not just about knowing the gospel.

It is about hearing and knowing and doing. But it is, and so it is about speaking as one who's heard the gospel.

It is about acting as one who's heard the gospel. It's about forgiving, even as one has been forgiven. True hearing of the gospel involves a response according to what is heard.

In other words, true hearing does not equal correct understanding. Now, friends, this is very important for us as a church, as we are, a church that loves knowing the scriptures. Because, please understand, true hearing is not just about having a correct understanding and a correct knowledge.

[16:02] To be godly does not mean simply having correct doctrine. True hearing involves actions. And in verse 23, James uses the illustration of a mirror.

Look at what he says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at it goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it, not forgetting what they've heard but doing it, they will be blessed in what they do.

Friends, I did mean to bring a mirror up this morning, but imagine that this is a mirror for a moment, okay? Now, if I get up in the morning and I go to the mirror and I look at it and I say, that's pretty shocking.

And then I walk away and do absolutely nothing. I might as well not have looked at the mirror. Is that correct? But imagine that I go and look in the mirror and I say, that is shocking.

I'd better do something about it. And then I go away and I shave or grow some hair or whatever. Then I've used the mirror wisely.

[17:10] Does that make sense? Well, similarly, in the word of truth, which is the gospel and the word of scripture, which reflects the gospel, I can also come and do exactly the same thing, can't I?

I can come and I can read it. I can hear what God has done for me in the Lord Jesus. I can close it and walk away and do absolutely nothing. It's as though I might as well not have read it.

But an alternative and much more useful thing is to read it, to see what God has done, to hear the great news of the gospel, to hear what God wants of my life, and to look at that and say, well, I am in a shocking state.

I hear what God has done for me in Jesus. I hear what God demands of me and walk away determined to put the things that I've learned into action. One is a foolish use of scripture, like you can have a foolish use of a mirror.

The other is a wise use of scripture and of the gospel reflected in scripture, because it involves changing. Friends, hearing the word of God in the gospel and in scripture is not just a once-off affair.

[18:27] It involves repeated looking. And it has a double edge when we look. It condemns us as sinful on one side, but it offers the freedom of sin.

And I think that's what that final verse means there. When it talks about the perfect law that gives freedom, it condemns, it's a law that condemns us, and it gives freedom in that it announces our forgiveness as well.

We must respond to this word in faith, in penitence, in gratitude, and friends, listen, in obedience. That is what we are called upon to do.

And James promises in 25, that if we do so, we'll be blessed in all our doing. Now, in the final three verses, James offers us a short examination. So here it is, friends, the exam.

And I know we all hate exams, but here is a little exam, a little test for us to measure how we are going. He gives three practical tests that'll help you to see whether or not you are a doer or just a hearer.

[19 : 32] Okay, here they are. Test one, verse 26. You see, hearing the word of the gospel will always affect our speech. If it doesn't, then maybe we have not responded to the gospel at all.

Maybe our religion is vain. Now, we're going to spend a whole week on this when we get to chapter three and the tongue. But it is a pretty tough test, isn't it? See, friends, what are you like with your tongue?

Perhaps you might like to reflect upon the last week and your use of your tongue. And the best test is to try it out in your family life and to see how it's gone within the household. What has your speech been like?

Is it quick to criticize rather than to forgive? Is it glib? Has it been rich in gossiping about people? Has it been arrogant? Have we been double-tongued? Liars? Guilty of misusing our tongues? Then maybe, friends, we haven't responded to the gospel or aren't responding to it.

[20 : 39] You see, friends, your tongue is a measure of the one who governs your body. And are you letting yourself govern your body? Or the Lord Jesus himself?

God himself. Second test is religion. Look at verse 27. Let me ask what religion might mean for you. I think often we speak negatively about religion, but there is a religion that is true and right religion. But I think often for us, religion is about church or something solemn or beautifully executed or liturgical excellence or reverence or grandeur or quietness or whatever.

Perhaps, though, for you, religion is not about corporate worship at all. Perhaps it's about your own private relationship with God. But look at how James talks about religion. He reckons that true religion is about loving your neighbor.

That is, it's about reining in your tongue in relation to your neighbor. It's about everyday practical acts of worship in loving your neighbor. It's about, as James says here, caring for orphans and widows and their equivalents in our modern society.

[21 : 47] You see, friends, we don't necessarily have orphans and widows in the same situation, you know, the same situation as the first century. But we do have the disadvantaged.

We do have those who are either socially or economically or whatever way disadvantaged. And they are our widows and orphans.

And we are to care for them. And friends, just think about your meeting, our meetings here in church. I think often we, we spend time with those we are close to.

We let the people on the edges of our congregation just not get looked after at all. We let those who don't belong to our particular group not get looked after at all.

We are to care for those disadvantaged, whichever way they are disadvantaged. And that is an expression of our true religion, our true faith.

[22 : 45] This sort of religion pleases God. It accords with the gospel of his son. You see, God, the son, left his father to come and redeem humanity.

He became a human being for us. We are to put aside our rights as he did for the sake of others. Test three is standards.

Thoughts, feelings, behavior. Are they unstained by the world? In other words, are your actions, your behavior, is your behavior tainted by the world, molded by the world, or molded by the gospel? Friends, I suspect, well, I know for myself, that so often my actions are molded by the world that I live in and the moral code that my world presents or our world presents rather than the moral code, the life that is presented by God in scripture and in the life of his son and in the death of his son. So friends, we are to be molded by the gospel and God's word. So those three tests, there are only three little tests. They're very telling, aren't they? Our tongues, our attitude to outsiders, our morality.

[24 : 15] How do you stand the test, friends? Three little tests are the first ones enough to shatter us all, isn't it? But we are to be molded by the gospel, by God's word.

Now, friends, let's go on and talk about, go back to where we started. You might remember that I said that James directs himself to individuals and to congregations. Let's think about what this means for us at both of these levels.

James has made it clear that as individuals, we should concentrate on our urgent task. Our urgent task is to hear from God, particularly in the gospel. The gospel lies at the core of our true Christian thought and actions.

And so we must take every opportunity as God's people, as individuals, to listen to it. And that involves listening to scripture, studying it, hearing it preached from, practicing what we hear.

We must take every opportunity to do this. And what about our congregational life? Well, again, we should do the same. We should take every opportunity to listen to the gospel as a congregation and to God's word.

[25 : 23] That involves listening to scripture, studying it, knowing it, hearing it preached from, practicing what we hear, urging each other to practice what we hear. These are the important things.

That's what the focus of our Christian lives is to be on. Now, with that, let's now apply it to how you might go about choosing a church. Now, I know most of you have chosen a church already, but it's still good to talk about because I think often we don't think about choosing a church and why we choose it and how we choose it.

When you are choosing a church or a group of people to associate with, that is a group of Christian people to associate with, what should you look for? What should be the first thing you look for? Should it be good music? Which is, I think, probably one of the most prevalent things people search for in a church these days, particularly in the younger generation, but not just the younger generation.

Should it be the gifted leader? Should it be that it's a happening place with people in your own stage of life? No.

[26 : 30] You should look in a church for a clear focus on hearing from God because that will flow out into everything else. You should look for a clear focus on hearing the gospel proclaimed.

And you can easily tell when you've found a church like this. You will see it in their words. You will see it in their actions.

You will see it verbally. And you will see it non-verbally. And it will be reflected in everything they do. It will saturate everything they do because it's what they want to do more than anything else.

It will therefore necessarily be a church that loves Jesus because it's bent on hearing about Him and from Him. So let's pray and let's pray that God makes us a church like this or makes us better as a church like this.

So let's pray. Father, we pray this day that we as individuals and as a church might be a church that is concerned to hear from you but not just to be listeners but to be doers also.

[27 : 57] And Father, we pray that this disposition will be reflected in the use of our tongues both here at church and away from church and in our families.

That this will be reflected in the way we look after those disadvantaged particularly amongst our congregation but also elsewhere. and Father, we pray that it will also be reflected in us being working hard at being not polluted by the world that we live in.

And Father, we pray that that world as it creeps into our church would not gain a foothold as well but that we here and in our the rest of our lives would be characterized by a moral cleanliness that comes from being saturated with you with the great news of the gospel and the word of scripture. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.