

Religion and Reality 10am

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 January 1999

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Our God and Father, that you would grant that as we turn our hearts and minds to the hearing of your word and the seeing of your perfect law, that you will grant to us that the implanted word may bring forth fruit in our lives. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. The text on page 213 of your Pew Bible is from the General Epistle of James, the first chapter, beginning at the 19th verse.

And the title that I've been given for this sermon is Religion and Reality.

And we happen to live in a culture that says there is virtually no reality in religion. And so I have a difficult task to perform, but I'll let James perform it for me.

So give your attention to what he says. James has written in these six or so verses a number of things.

[1 : 23] We are used to, in our society, reading a book in order to grasp one idea that the author wants to convey. I can assure you that James, in six verses, could provide enough ideas for 27 volumes of books.

And here I have 20 minutes. Anyway, he has that to say. And he begins by saying, know this. This is an imperative command to his readers. This is what you have to know. Get this on the bottom line so you have that in perspective.

The second thing he says is addressing the congregation or the company to which this letter was to be read. He addresses them as my beloved brethren.

And considering he was a brother of our Lord Jesus, for him to address us as brethren and sisters, I'm sure, is an amazing statement that it should come from him.

[2 : 41] And it's amazing further because we are beloved. That's the condition we are in because of God's love for us.

It is a condition which we should enjoy because of our love for one another. So take note of those around you and ask whether there is some reality in that or not or whether there should be.

James is unashamed to address you as his beloved brethren. And then he says, this is what you are to know because this is where religion touches reality.

And he says, let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, which is a peculiar statement in a world where every man is quick to anger, quick to speak, and never bothers to hear or listen.

So he turns our world upside down in one sentence. Be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Now, anger is something that comes very naturally to us.

[3 : 56] And it is a powerful motivator. If you can get people angry, you can get them to act. And so there are lots of people whose fame in history has been that they have been able to rouse to a state of indignant anger great masses of people who then go out and perform acts of terrible violence.

Anger leads to violence. Violence finds expression in mental, emotional, and physical abuse one of another.

And that's within the family as well as among nations. And this abuse goes on until somebody will stop and listen, stop and hear.

So that's why James begins and says, let every man be quick to hear. We try and get people are very quick to be angry and very slow to hear.

And then he says, the reason that you are to do this in verse 20 is that the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.

[5 : 15] And when he talks about the righteousness of God, let me remind you that you face the cross of Jesus Christ where the righteousness of God is placarded before us.

God's righteousness in giving his son to die on the cross for us, to redeem us from all unrighteousness. From the cross comes the word of forgiveness that you are to be quick to hear. The word of redemption that you are to be quick to hear. The word of new life. The word concerning the indwelling Holy Spirit.

You are to be quick to hear it. But because in that you are hearing the righteousness of God. The very function that you are involved in right now in being in this service, my beloved brethren, is to come in touch with the righteousness of God.

You may find it much easier to be swept away by anger over something which may be major or may be insignificant. And I must say that in my experience in the ministry, an enormous number of people go away from church angry.

[6 : 40] They have found something to be angry at. And the whole of the service has been occupied in, in a sense, giving life to that anger. And I must say that now that I spend a good deal more time in the pew than in the pulpit, I very often go to church and am consumed by anger at some issue or another.

And go away with that anger rather than with a vital contact with the reality which stems from the righteousness of God.

Well, we are to be, the angry man does not, James says, work the righteousness of God. And so he says, therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

That's why you need to hear the reading of the word of God. You need to hear the word of God preached. You need to hear the word of God in the prayers. You need to encounter this implanted word in the sacrament of the Holy Communion.

That's the purpose of your being here in order that you might come in touch with the righteousness of God implanted in your heart by the word.

[8 : 04] That's what he means when he says that what happens with anger and with malice and with wickedness is it broadcasts seed into your life.

And that seed grows up quickly and is described by James as rank growth. If you live in the Gulf Islands, rank growth is what broom does.

It grows everywhere and everything. Give it an opening and it's there. And so in our lives, rank growth takes place when instead of being quick to hear, we are quick to anger.

And then the seed of our disaffections take hold in our lives and produce rank growth. So part of the service this morning is that that rank growth in your life should be uprooted.

So that the implanted word, which has the wonderful ability of being able to save your souls, which you may think is an old-fashioned concept, but to put it into contemporary language, which is able to make you into a whole person.

[9 : 24] That's what the implanted word is able to do as opposed to the rank growth, which seems to take seed in our lives much more easily.

So that James then goes on and says, Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only. You see, one of the great things that separates reality from religion is the divorce between hearing and doing. These things are not meant to be divorce. Because you hear, you do. But there has been and there is through the whole of religion this divorce.

People hear it, but they never do it. And if you look carefully, I mean, Ezekiel, I think I'm indignant and cynical sometimes, but listen to Ezekiel as you heard him read this morning.

It says, and the Lord is addressing Ezekiel. He says, And they sit before you as my people, and they hear what you say, but they will not do it.

[10 : 58] For with their lips they show much love, but their heart is set on their gain. They're checking over the stock market in their minds as they're listening to the sermon.

Lo, you are to them like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument.

For they hear what you say, but they don't do it. When this comes, and it will come, then you will know that a prophet has been among you.

Well, you see, that is the condition that he says takes over. And when this divorce takes place between being hearers and doers. And he said, the end result of it is that you deceive yourselves. He says, be doers of the word and not hearers only. Because when you split those two, then you are deceiving yourself. Nobody's deceiving you.

[12 : 08] You're deceiving yourself. And then your attendance, as Ezekiel describes here, their attendance upon the preaching of the word of the Lord, is only to confirm their self-deception.

That's how it works. We come together in order to confirm our self-deception. That's not acceptable. James says, he says, if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he's like one who observes his natural face in a mirror.

For he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. And I think, unfortunately, James lived when technology had achieved mirrors, but they hadn't achieved radio or television.

And only if James could have seen that, oh, how he would have arrived. Because he said, you watch it and watch it and watch it. It's background noise. Wherever you are, you're listening to it all the time, but paying absolutely no attention to it.

And he says, that's what it's like. And he isn't being critical of this. He's just saying, that's the way life is. We're hearing and hearing and hearing and hearing and hearing and hearing and hearing.

[13 : 35] But that's all. It doesn't. That's our natural condition. But, you see, and now he goes back to the implanting of the word. And he says that this word that is implanted is like the perfect law, the law of liberty.

And so he says, what you are to do is to give your whole attention to the law of liberty. Now, this law is for James, who was a Jew, you know, how the whole Jewish religion, and we have inherited it from them.

It's been part of their inheritance to the Christian church, is looking into this law. Now, they describe the law especially as the Torah.

That's the heart of it. It's in the law. And they look at this law. Now, the trouble with the law is that we all find it personally inadequate.

We have a sense that deep down from within myself, I will do what is good and I will not do what is evil. There is somewhere in me a law that will dictate that happening.

[15 : 02] Well, there ain't no such law. It isn't there. The Jews said it isn't there. It's in the Torah. Our society says it isn't there.

It's in the law. And so whenever you come in touch with religion, you go smack up against the reality that the law, while it says it points the way ahead, it also frustrates the development of who we are as persons.

It's not like the implanted word which is able to save your soul. All it can do, and Paul reaffirmed this, all the law can ultimately do is condemn you.

And so we are frustrated by it. Stephen Carter, who is a professor and has written a book on the subject, summarizes the necessity of law in our society.

And he says, every law imposes one person's morality on somebody else. Now, we have a high level of resistance to that taking place.

[16 : 16] If in your house the husband makes the laws and you obey them, there's something unsatisfactory going on in that house. If in your house the wife makes the laws and you obey them, there's something unsatisfactory going on in that house.

And resistance to it is palpable, I'm sure. Well, he says, every law imposes one person's morality on somebody else. He says, law has only two functions.

To tell people what to do when they would rather not, and to tell people not to do what they would rather. And he said, that's why the law is so frustrating.

It's frustrating. So he says, you can see, you can see in that, and I just remind you of this, that most people associate the heart of religion with law.

And that's not, that's a pretty good guide, but it leads to frustration most of the time. And people would rather not be religious. They would rather be spontaneously good people from the heart.

[17 : 27] But that doesn't work. And so, we associate religion with law because we regard religion primarily as that which tells us what to do when we would rather not, and tells us what not to do when we would rather do it.

And that's where we bump into the law. Well, I think when James says, look into the perfect law, and by that, well, by that process of looking, remember, he's made these two things very emphatic. He says, hear, be quick to hear. And then he says, look deeply. So we are to use both these things to, to encounter this perfect law.

And I think the perfect law is that which is spoken about in the prophets as to come to fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So that, for the new community of the beloved brethren, the perfect law is the gospel of Jesus Christ. And you are to look deeply into that gospel.

[18:37] And he says, that's the perfect law. And that is the law, which, unlike any other law, gives liberty. We think of law as handcuffing us, putting us in chains, making us subject to a tyranny of some kind.

But he says, this perfect law is the law of liberty. And it's spoken of prophetically in Jeremiah, when the Lord says, I will put my law within them.

I will write it upon their hearts. I will be their God. They shall be my people. No longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother saying, know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.

For I will forgive their iniquity. And I will remember their sin no more. So you see this implanted word, which is now expressed as the perfect law, is that which points back to the righteousness of God.

And the righteousness of God is, which is affected by hearing and looking into the perfect law of liberty. The righteousness of God is something that is written in our hearts by God for our obedience.

[19:58] So that you are to spend your life peering into this law and persevering in it. You are to make this law applicable in the university at which you work, in the profession of which you are a member, in the industry to which you belong, in the school that you attend, in the community that you live in, in your life of the arts and drama and all those things.

In every aspect of this, you are to be looking into the perfect law and trying to find and give expression to the reality of that law in your life.

That's why he says, why he tells us that we are to look into, he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and perseveres.

That's the word we've run into before, remember, in James, in the earlier verses of this chapter. We are to persevere. And then he goes back and says, being no more, being no hearers that forget, but doers that act.

You see that divorce takes place. Don't let hearing and doing get separated from one another. Because if they do, then you forget what you hear and you are incapacitated from doing anything.

[21:27] And so, if you, he says, he that forgets, that he will be deceived, and that's when he goes on in verse 26 to say about this matter of religion.

And he says, the profound unreality of religion is achieved, in verse 26, by the person who thinks he is religious and does not even bridle his tongue, but deceives his own heart.

That is, in his own thinking, in his own thought life, he is self-deceived, deceiving his heart. And James ends up by saying, this man's religion is vain.

It's empty. And that's why the culture to which we belong is quick to make the charge that religion is vain and empty.

It has no content. It has no reality. And they're right. They're right insofar as it is the religion of somebody who doesn't shut up.

[22:54] It's interesting. And I hesitate to say this. But it's interesting, isn't it, that the gift of tongues is one of the great gifts of the New Testament.

And James says, the man who doesn't bridle his tongue. Work that one out for me sometime when you have a chance.

But I think the content for working it out is right here. And that is that we have to be extremely careful that we don't deceive ourselves, deceive our hearts in that.

And then he concludes this section and this chapter with, religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the widows, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

Now, just the things that happen to religion are that it becomes defiled, and it doesn't, and, I mean, you see that to counterfeit something, it's got to have some worth in the first place, doesn't it?

[24:17] I mean, you don't, you don't counterfeit 10 cent pieces because it's too much work. But you might counterfeit a thousand dollar bill because you make great, well, because of the extreme importance of the personal faith and religion of somebody, as described in James, then it can easily

be, it can easily be counterfeited.

And he says that to get pure religion, which is undefiled, before God and the Father, and I think he's talking about all religions everywhere, he's saying the essence of it is that it's got to be something which is ultimately lived out before the God and Father, creator and sustainer of the whole universe, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's got to be before him. And he said what, how it expresses itself and is, and he makes it very simple in terms of one ethical dimension of it.

He says, the way it expresses itself is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction because there is a great deal of affliction in the world.

And God's desire for us is that in our loneliness and in our despair, we suffer affliction.

[26 : 05] And people who are sensitive to that affliction are people who are capable of ministering to us the reality of God's righteousness as it is revealed in Jesus Christ.

To bring into that human affliction the reality of the implanted word, the reality of the righteousness of God, the reality of the perfect law, the law of liberty, to bring into that situation, into that place of affliction, which probably many of us suffer.

But then it goes on to say the other dimension of it, the other side of it, is you are to keep oneself unstained from the world.

And this sort of concluding line is simply this, that we live in a world and we, in a sense, are tattooed by, by our world, conformed to our world, stained by our world.

And that that's, and you see, we're talking essentially about religion. And religion means that you are living in this world, but you are not part of this world.

[27 : 34] You are living in relationship to the eternal God who has revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ. So your life is not to be deeply stained by your involvement in the world.

Your life is to be brought to a place of reality through your relationship to God as He has spoken to us through His implanted word, as He has made His righteousness known to us, and as we have, in our relationship to Him, encountered the perfect law, the law of liberty.

I feel this sermon is incomplete. I don't know how to stop. But I will. And remind you that James picks up these themes in chapters 2 and 3.

So be back next Sunday. Amen. Amen.