

Religion and Reality 8am

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[0 : 00] Our God, as we turn our hearts and minds to your word, help us to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

Grant this, we ask, in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. If you look in the Pew Bible on page 213, you'll see the text from which the sermon is taken this morning.

And it's part of the epistle of James. And one of the great men of the ancient world was called Herod the Great.

And it's interesting because he was great perhaps in his own time, but part of the reason of his greatness is that he beheaded the apostle James.

And he's probably more remembered because of Christian faith than the tyranny of his own time and his own power. And I mention that only because as you read these very simple words in this passage this morning, you may find it interesting to remember that the man who wrote them died for them.

[1 : 44] Why that should happen is probably difficult for us to understand. But the people of that day are perhaps not unlike the people of our own day.

So look at the text. It begins, Know This. The title of this talk this morning is Religion and Reality. And James is trying to lead us to reality in religion. And our whole society, our whole culture is committed to the idea that religion is an escape from reality.

And James contends that religion is at the heart of reality. And he starts by saying you are to take this carefully in your mind.

You are to take note so as not to forget. Know This. Now, one of the other great virtues of our society, I speak cynically when I say that, is that the only person who could possibly be objective about religion is somebody who doesn't have one.

[3 : 06] That's, uh, there's apparently a logic to that in our society, which we all adhere to. Uh, James is not such a person. And you see that from the first verse.

Know This, My Beloved Brethren. He belongs to a community of those whom he calls his brethren. Interesting because he is reputed to be the brother of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so when he extends that, that, uh, word brethren to those who are gathered with him, he apparently has learned the lesson which Jesus taught.

When, would you remember when, uh, when, uh, Jesus' mother and brothers were come to get him one day and, uh, they told Jesus, your mother and your brothers are waiting for you.

And Jesus replied to them, my mother and my brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it. That must have been somewhat devastating to them.

[4 : 14] But, uh, it's probably a very serious consideration for all of us that we belong to a community of the beloved.

And, uh, James addresses us in this Catholic or universal epistle as brethren.

And by this, he includes sisters. The word is there. Sometimes it needs to be re-underlined so as people understand it properly.

And so he says, it is imperative that you know, it is imperative that you take note so as not to forget. That's what, what's, that's what his introduction to verse 19 is.

Know this. It's an imperative command. This you are to know. And then he delves into what religion is about. And he says, it's about being quick to hear and slow to speak and slow to anger, which is exactly the reverse order that we live in.

[5 : 27] We are very quick to speak and very quick to get angry and very slow to listen. You can consider domestic quarrels in your home.

You consider relationships with friends and children. You can see how often it happens. In fact, I don't, I sometimes think that going to church on a Sunday morning is one of the easiest ways to provoke anger, you know, especially when Felix gets up and reads us a letter.

You, from the, you might, you might, your first and immediate response might be to be angry. It might not, but it might be to be angry.

angry. And if you don't find occasion to stir your anger in that, then there are always other things about the ordering of the service or the neglect of this or the forgetting of this or the, some other thing which can provoke your anger so that it's not unusual for people to come to church to have their anger triggered and spend the whole of their time there being angry and finding as occasion afterwards to express their anger to whoever they like.

I mean, that, that's a typical experience for me. I, I sit in the congregation a lot now and that happens to me and my whole time of worship is taken up with trying to put out the, the fire of anger that so quickly is stirred up in us humanly speaking.

[7 : 08] So it's interesting that, James says, turn it around, turn it around. Hear first.

Be quick to hear. And so, you have to learn to stop and listen. And, then he goes on to say that the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God.

So, presumably, the whole focus of reality and religion is to find the place of God's righteousness, not a place of self-righteousness or self-vindication.

We don't come to church in order to be self-vindicated or to reinforce our high opinion of ourselves. We come to church to be brought in line with the righteousness which God alone confers.

and so, he says, anger doesn't achieve that. And so, anger is a waste of time. It doesn't achieve the righteousness of God.

[8 : 18] And, let me tell you that the whole, the whole design and structure of a simple service of Holy Communion at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning is to bring you dynamically in touch with the forgiveness of your sins, the atonement of the blood of Christ on the cross, participation in the life of the Holy Spirit and, in effect, into an awareness of the righteousness of God.

And so, that isn't achieved, James says, in a very simple way. It just isn't done through our anger.

And it isn't done, he says, in verse 21, because, what happens is that filthiness and rank growth and malice grow up quickly.

Now, my own thinking about this is that on Main Island where we have a place, if you clear some land, unless you do something with it, almost immediately the weeds and the rank of growth comes up and takes over.

Broome is one of the serious offenders. But there's other kinds of rank growth. In fact, BC, because it's so wet and the climate is so nice, rank growth takes place here very quickly.

And so, that same rank growth, which defiles and makes filthy, and is, you see, he relates it back to this business of anger.

[9 : 53] Anger produces this rank growth. Speaking quickly and not hearing produces this rank growth.

You allow this seed to take root in your life. And so, he says, this is, this has got to be deliberately put away. You've got to be conscious of this process in your life and you have to put it away, he says.

in fact, when you look at some of the derivations, the reason that Felix and I are adorned in these glorious robes is really based on this verse, you know, because underneath is the rank growth and we cover it up with these beautiful white robes.

and having put one thing away, we are to be adorned with something different. But what is the different thing? The different thing is, he says in verse 21, the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

Now, what the difference here is the rank growth that takes over in our lives compared to the hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ which is the implanted word which is put in your life by the hearing, remember, be quick to hear.

[11 : 22] You hear that implanted word, that implanted word is able to save your souls. You receive this into your life.

It's a kind of picture of conception. Conception takes place as this implanted word finds a place in your hearts and it is that implanted word that will not end in rank growth but will end in saving your souls.

And saving your souls really means becoming whole persons, becoming a whole person. So that's the process which is at the heart of, of the reality of religion.

Putting away the rank growth, receiving the implanted word. Well, then he goes on and goes back to being doers of the word and not hearers only.

And, you see, one of the realities of our human existence is that a divorce has taken place between hearing and doing. It was never meant to be that way.

[12 : 38] What you heard you were to do. But, religion that is out of touch with reality is religion in which hearing and doing have been separated from one another.

So people hear it but they never get around to doing it. And, they can by being, and did you, I don't know if you notice that lovely picture in Ezekiel that was read for us this morning and that I hope I can find quickly to remind you of it.

The, the, the, the, the lovely picture, no, I guess Ezekiel was marked by some cynicism too when he wrote it and he said, come and hear what the word is that comes forth from the Lord and they come to you as people come and they sit before you as my people and they hear what you say but they will not do it for with their lips they show much love but their heart is set on their game and 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 will not do it.

So this, this is a, a deeply rooted disease in our humanity that we hear and we deceive ourselves in thinking that hearing is all that's required but what James says is that hearing and doing are locked together and one must find expression in the other or else hearing is not hearing and doing is not doing and of course we live in a world where there are all sorts of people who do, do, do, do but never hear and there are also people who hear, hear, hear, hear but never do and that divorce has taken place and James says the escape from reality there is that you deceive yourselves when that divorce happens in your life.

Then he gives us a picture of how this is worked out. He said we live our lives in the same way that we sort of catch a glimpse of ourselves in a mirror. You know, you look and then you move away you put on your lipstick you comb your hair you do this or whatever and then you move away and forget immediately what it's all about.

[15 : 12] And he said that's what for a lot of people that's what religion is it's something where you take a quick look at it and then you move on and it's forgotten. And so he says this is the picture of what happens and then he says in contrast to that there is one who is to look into the perfect law of liberty and that perfect law of liberty is you know that's James it's James the Jew speaking because as you know the whole of the Jewish religion is concerned with a deep commitment to the understanding of the law the Torah and to read it syllable by syllable and to study it and to learn it was considered the great thing in Jewish faith.

But this is not the law the Torah that he's talking about he calls this the the the perfect law the law of liberty and Stephen Carter in a book which has to do with he's a law professor at Yale and he's written a book on what's happened when the state gets away from the reality of religion he says every law imposes one person's morality on somebody else law he says has only two functions one is to tell people to do what they would rather not and the other is to forbid them to do what they would do and that's that's how the law works now that is not the perfect law the law of liberty that is a law which implies bondage it implies subjection to some kind of tyranny and you can see when I mean you can see how many people identify religion with the law because they consider religion does much the same thing it tells you to do what you'd rather not do and it tells you not to do what you would like to do and and that's a religious person is considered somebody who has got themselves caught in that particular mousetrap well James is talking about the perfect law and I think what he what he is meaning by this and I think he's meaning the thing that is at the heart of our whole humanity that everybody is looking for that perfect law which will bring liberty liberty from sin and liberty from death and liberty from our own bondages and I think that perfect law is the one which is spoken of when Ezekiel writes the quotes the Lord speaks and Ezekiel writes down what he says he says

I will put my law within them will write it upon their hearts I will be their God they shall be my people and 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 and so it's this I think this is this is this perfect law the law of liberty is in a sense the goal of of all religions is to find that and this one says we found it and

