

True Religion James 1:21-27

True Religion - true devotion to God - is defined less by how much we know and more by how we apply what we know. God's Word unapplied is useless to us. But if we'll put our knowledge of His Word into practice by fleeing from what it prohibits and practicing what it commands, God will bless us and use us to make a lasting difference in this world.

Had that moment a month ago when I realized I am, officially, getting old...
pulled a muscle in my neck... while taking off my sock!
Long dress sock – hard to get over the heal – yanked on it. Bam! How lame is that!

Now why did that happen? Not just because I'm getting old.... because I don't exercise enough.

- My neck has always bothered me
- Doc told me for last 5 yrs that I need to be lifting weights 3x a week
 - o told me what exercises to do & how to do them
- ...But I don't – good week 2x; bad week nada!
- And so, my neck is weak & I injured it taking off a sock

I know what I need to do to avoid injury, but that knowledge is useless to me if I don't apply it.

The majority of our personal failures in life are not due to a lack of knowledge...
We fail because we don't apply the knowledge we have.

The big idea of our passage this morning: **Knowledge unapplied is useless.**

Here we are in a Bible church...

- LOTS of knowledge here – if known for anything, it's knowledge about Bible!
- But it's not our knowledge that makes us a light in this world...
- it's how we apply it that matters!

That's **TRUE RELIGION** in God's eyes – that we live out what His Word teaches

- If we don't, then our religion is useless – doesn't do the world any good.
- Sadly, Bible churches can be full of super intelligent but spiritually bankrupt people
 - o don't apply their vast knowledge of scripture
 - o and so, make no difference in this world for Christ

Knowledge unapplied is useless.

That's what James wants to challenge in our passage this morning – the human tendency to accumulate knowledge but not act on it. James begins with a command...

COMMAND (read v21-22)

- command = "receive the Word"

- **What is the "Word" we are to receive?**
 - o *logos* – In passages like this, usually refers to Scripture
 - o But James has in mind something narrower than that...

- He uses a synonym for the “Word” in v25 – read v25a
 - Word = “the perfect law, law of liberty” in v25
 - But what is that Law?
 - James gives us a clue in 2:8... read
 - “the royal law” = lit: “the law of the king”
 - Jesus is our King
 - So “Word” or “Law” in James = the commands taught by Jesus
 - Jesus revealed God’s standards in His teachings and in His life
 - Think “Sermon on the Mount”

- **James says that Word has been “implanted” in us**
 - Not “innate” – not in you from birth – not conscience
 - It was planted in you / written in you the moment you believed
 - In fulfillment of the promise of the New Covenant (read Jer 31:33)
 - Promised in the Old Testament, but not fulfilled until the death of Jesus
 - From Jesus’ death on – belief brings regeneration and indwelling Spirit
 - Spirit writes God’s Word on your heart – uses Scripture as you read it to transform you from the inside out
 - Significance of implanted: now you can understand & obey because it’s living and active within you
 - BUT... means this command is pointless if God’s Word hasn’t yet been implanted
 - You cannot act on what you do not yet have!

- **What does it mean to “receive” the Word?**
 - “receive” can be misleading – sounds like we don’t have it and need to receive it
 - but that’s not the case – it’s implanted – we have it, it’s in us!!
 - verb means “to welcome, to accept, to submit to”
 - clarified by “in humility”
 - refers to an attitude of faith and submission
 - receive in humility = bow the knee to the Word – surrender to it
 - **So, “Receive the Word” = “Submit to Christ’s commands”**

- **What does that involve? Two things according to v21-22...**
 - **Turn away from what it prohibits (21a)**
 - reread v21a
 - “put off/take off” – like taking off dirty clothing
 - “all filthiness”
 - only here in New Testament but related to words for dirty, filthy, defiled
 - = “*moral uncleanness or vulgarity*”
 - lit: “the evil that is so prevalent”
 - = the evil thoughts, words, actions that are so abundant in our world and in our own lives.
 - broad language – not a particular sin but any and every sin
 - remove from your life anything God’s Word prohibits
 - Reminds me of swimming at our neighborhood pool...
 - hot cement – wore my tennis shoes
 - sank like a rock!
 - to swim across pool, first thing I had to do: take shoes off
 - To submit to God’s Word: 1st = take off immorality and sin
 - But that alone, is not enough.

- Pool illustration – taking off shoes just first step
- Now I have to swim – head right direction
- So important: the godly life is NOT just about what you avoid!
 - if all you do is avoid bad stuff, you are not honoring God
 - life is also about what good things you practice
- **Practice what it commands (re-read v22)**
 - very literal language: be “doers” of the Word, not merely “hearers.”
 - God prescribed many things in His Word for us to do
 - we’ll talk about a few in particular later this morning
 - The key now: what counts is not hearing His commands...
 - share gospel, love spouse, comfort the sick, use gifts, give...
 - ...but doing them
 - As James will conclude... read 4:17
 - What counts is that we practice what God’s Word commands

My guess: none of this is surprising to you!!

So, why don’t we?

Why don’t we more often avoid what God prohibits and practice what God commands?

Because we lack sufficient motivation.

- Why I don’t exercise more: lack sufficient motivation to overcome fatigue and laziness
- The benefits don’t seem to outweigh the costs

That’s why we often fail to apply God’s Word:

- because the benefits of obedience don’t seem to outweigh the cost of sin in our minds.
- We don’t obey because we lack sufficient motivation to obey

So, James follows the command with motivation – strong motivation.

MOTIVATION

Why should we submit to the Word?

We’ve already read his primary answer – re-read end of v21...

Why? (1) Because it will “save your souls”

- What does that mean?
- Our assumption: get to heaven!
- “save” = “to deliver, rescue”
- “soul” = you as a living person – your life (not some invisible part of you)
- so “save your soul” = “rescue your physical life” – “keep you from dying”
 - That’s what it means the only other time it’s used in James – read 5:20
 - not about heaven or hell – about rescue from literal death
 - We know that because it follows v15 – read 5:15 (“restore” = “save”)
 - You see that same terminology used frequently in the OT
 - Ezek 18:26-27
 - “save his life” = “save his soul (*nephesh*)”
 - point: sin brings death but righteousness preserves your physical life
 - Psalm 6:2,4 – “...rescue my soul; Save me...”
 - David is gravely ill; his body is failing him; death is imminent
 - “rescue my life” = don’t let this sickness kill me!

- **“Save your soul” = deliver you from premature physical death**
 - If you submit to God’s Word – it will preserve your life
 - you will still one day die, but you won’t die prematurely
 - If you walk in sin, it can kill you!
 - Easy to prove: **Steve McNair** – former star QB of the Tennessee Titans. Married man with sons, began to date a mistress a little more than half his age, things went south, and so she shot and killed him.
 - Sin can kill you.
 - And so, obeying God’s Word can literally rescue your life from death.
- **James wants us to understand: sin has serious consequences even for believers.**
 - Through faith, we’ve been saved from the **penalty** of sin...
 - BUT NOT the **consequences**
 - Forgiven
 - But forgiveness does not remove the natural consequences of sin
 - in the universe God has made, sin wreaks havoc
 - for believers, one of most serious consequences = physical death
 - but not the only possible consequence
 - James reveals another in the next couple verses...
- **(2) (read v22-24) Disobedience to the Word brings self-deception**
 - metaphor about a mirror
 - rare and of poor quality in ancient world
 - result: most people were unfamiliar with their own face
 - James pictures someone:
 - comes upon one of these rare mirrors
 - sees himself briefly
 - departs and immediately forgets what he looks like
 - had no lasting impact on him
 - Probably not insignificant that he specifies that this is “a man”!!
 - Relatively speaking, we don’t pay a lot of attention to mirrors.
 - A few years ago I got a bad haircut
 - she slipped – chili-bowl haircut!
 - But good news: I’m a guy – I don’t really care!
 - See it for 1 minute in the morning, “That’s unfortunate!”
 - Forgotten about it before I leave the bathroom!!
 - Julie cared more than I did! Fixed it because it was driving her crazy
 - But not me – I was the guy in this illustration
 - looking in mirror had no lasting impact on me
 - Similarly, hearing the Word without obeying leaves you unaffected & unimproved
 - mirror reveals your physical condition...
 - Word reveals your spiritual condition.
 - But if you don’t obey it, your time in the Word has no affect
 - leave unchanged & unimproved
 - **And worse, you become deceived.**
 - v21 – “delude themselves”
 - They think: “I listen to sermons, read the Bible, memorize Scripture, so I am a godly man”
 - NO! If you’re not applying what you hear, read, memorize – you’re fooling yourself!
 - They are deceived – don’t see themselves as they really are
 - Think they’re godly – but they’re not
 - Think they’re mature – but they’re not

- Think they're holy – but they're not.
- Our sin blinds us to reality and makes fools of us.
- If you want to live a life that is true, authentic, real – then you must obey!

James began motivation by revealing the painful and destructive consequences of sin for believers and unbelievers alike.

In v25, he looks at the flip side – happy side – the good that comes from obedience...

- **Obedience to the Word brings God's blessing (read v25)**
 - "blessed" = broad term denoting God's favor
 - basic idea: your life will be the opposite of the life of sin
 - So, list out all the negative consequences of sin in the life of a believer according to James...
 - Consequences of sin (for believers)
 - self-deception
 - uselessness
 - shame at Judgment Seat of Christ
 - conflict and strife with others
 - physical illness and even death
 - The life of blessing is the exact opposite of all of these negative consequences. And sure enough, James will tell us that obedience brings...
 - Consequences of obedience
 - divine wisdom instead of self-deception
 - usefulness to others
 - reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ
 - peace with others
 - God's healing and protection of your physical life
 - not a guarantee of a long, sickness-free life
 - but promise that you won't get sick or die due to sin
 - will live exactly as long as God wants you to
 - won't be taken out of game prematurely
- Just look at that contrast for a moment.
- **Yeah, obedience to God's Word is hard.**
 - Shedding all the sins we find so pleasurable and easy – that's hard
 - And practicing all the righteous commands God gives – that's hard, too.
 - There is a real cost to obey – it's hard and takes sacrifice and discipline
- **BUT... "The cost of obedience is nothing compared with the cost of disobedience."**
 - Obedience is tough, but sin is deadly!
 - Obedience is hard, but sin will hurt you, hurt others, leave you full of regrets, ... put you in an early grave.

So, having told us why it's worth the price to submit to God's Word and obey it, James ends with application...

How exactly should we go about obeying God's Word? There's a lot that Jesus taught. What in particular does James want us to focus on applying?...

APPLICATION (read v26-27)

- Remember, submitting to the Word involves two things: turn away... practice...
- James gives us specific examples for each
 - These verses are not comprehensive – just particular areas to focus on
- **What sin should we turn away from? 2 sins to focus on removing...**

- **v26: evil speech**
 - Person who chooses not to “bridle” his tongue
 - “bridle” = to guide with a bit – how you control a horse
 - To bridle the tongue = control/restrain your speech
 - avoid saying anything that God’s Word prohibits: things that are immoral, hurtful, selfish, prideful.
 - If we fail to do that, then our “religion” is worthless
 - religion = our worship and devotion to God
 - And we are deceiving ourselves
 - exactly what James warned us about in the mirror illustration
 - Our time in church & in God’s Word is worthless
 - So, pay close attention to your words. Do they honor God or not?
 - Probably: “Often, but not always”
 - Bit slips on occasion! Let loose something not-quite-righteous, hurtful, selfish
 - So ask yourself, “What are the situations that give you the most trouble with your tongue?”
 - Tired? Stressed?
 - With that group of friends who don’t bring out the best in you.
 - When you’re talking with that person who gets you tense
 - When you see those situations coming, pray ahead of time
 - that He would help you be slow to speak
 - **v27: “keep oneself unstained” = remove the evil influence of the world**
 - “world” – sometimes neither good or bad – just the world
 - but not here... = the sinful culture that we live in
 - Remain unstained, untainted
 - NOT by withdrawing from the world!!
 - Can’t be a light if you don’t engage with the world
 - Called to love and care for all people, both sinners and saints
 - BUT, be careful not to let the sinful values & practices of the world rub off on you.
 - My favorite pan in the kitchen – heavy stainless steel
 - no Teflon
 - have to stay alert to keep food from sticking
 - keep it moving, make sure there’s enough oil
 - Exactly what James means!
 - We’re not coated in spiritual Teflon!
 - As we live in this world, if we’re not careful, it’s values and practices will stick – like burnt chicken on my pan!
 - As you engage with this world, be vigilant for signs you’re getting stained
 - Take thoughts captive
 - Are you thinking like God, or like the world... speaking... acting...
 - Where you see worldly values sticking – turn to God in prayer
 - Find an accountability partner
- **What good should we practice? charity/care for the vulnerable (27a)**
- “widows and orphans”
 - in ancient world – no safety net; no opportunities – beyond hope
 - James point: care for those who are vulnerable
 - Anyone who will suffer or even perish without our help.
 - Among all of God’s commands, few are as crucial as this
 - This, James says, is true religion

- Pure and undefiled = authentic and real
 - our devotion to God – not so much songs as how we care for vulnerable!
- Charity is what demonstrates our religion – our devotion to God.
 - Do you want to know if I love God?
 - Look at my check book! Look at how I use my time.
 - Do I do things that provide real and meaningful care for the vulnerable?
 - That’s the mark of true religion.
- As Martin Luther so eloquently put... “The world does not need a definition of religion as much as it needs a demonstration.”
- Now how do we put this into practice?
 - Don’t just care for their physical needs! Care for both physical and spiritual
- At Grace Bible Church... ministries within & outside that care for both physical and spiritual needs of the vulnerable
- Let me share a few of these ministries with you in this video and then afterwards, I’ll tell you how to get involved...
- **video**

Introduce ministries

- Ministries at Grace:
 - Youth Impact – reaches out to at-risk youth in our community and empowers them to become Godly leaders www.youthimpactbcs.com
 - Faithful to the Fatherless – cares for orphans and for families in our community who adopt or foster orphans www.faithful2fatherless.com
 - OWLS – Older Wiser Loving Saints – provides a community for the widows and widowers of Grace
- Community ministries we partner with:
 - Aggieland Pregnancy Outreach – provides practical help and spiritual care for those facing an unplanned pregnancy. They also help facilitate adoption when that’s desired. www.pregnancyoutreach.org
 - Hope Pregnancy Center – provides care, counsel, and the gospel to those facing crisis pregnancies. www.hopepregnancy.org www.partnerwithhope.org
 - Brazos Church Pantry – cares for the elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged in our community
 - SOS ministries – shares the message of hope, love, and salvation with the hopeless. They care for both children and adults affected by poverty, drugs, and gang violence. www.saveourstreetsministries.org

Learn more on our website: “Serve” and “Community Outreach”

www.grace-bible.org/serve/community-outreach

- One exception: to find out more about OWLS – just call the church office.

Find a way to care for the vulnerable.

- By volunteering or giving financially to one of these ministries
- By caring for the vulnerable in your life – family, friends, neighbors, coworker, fellow student...
- True Religion is to meet those needs – both physical and spiritual

Close with the words of James’ older half-brother – Jesus - **Mt 7:24-27**

Matthew 7:24–27

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock...

...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. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall.”

- both men hear; but the key is obedience. If you obey, your life is blessed. If you don't, your life will fall apart around you.

Let's pray for Jesus' help to obey...