

## **JAMES 1.22-2.25: RELIGION NEEDS TO BE REAL**

*(Chelmsford 26 July 2009)*

### **1. DON'T JUST LISTEN – DO SOMETHING**

Some people sample sermons rather like wine-tasters sip a rare vintage.

In the old days sermon-tasters went from church to church trying out preachers – these days they are often found at places like Spring Harvest.

More concerned for style than for substance, sermons are judged on their entertainment value, rather than on the message itself.

By contrast James says: **“Do not deceive yourselves by just listening to his [God’s] word; instead, put it into practice”** (1.22).

The key test of a sermon is does it issue in action?

Does it make a difference to the way in which you live your life on Monday morning?

If not, then frankly it’s not worth the bother of going to church.

**“Whoever listens to the word but does not put it into practice is like a man who looks in a mirror and sees himself as he is. He takes a good look at himself and then goes away and at once forgets what he looks like”** (1.23,24).

I don’t know about you, but there are only three reasons why I look into a mirror: I look into a mirror to shave, to comb my hair, and to my tie.

Once done – it’s forgotten. My looking into the mirror does not affect the way I live.

The same is true of women – they may spend more time looking into a mirror.

But once they have done their face and have gone out of the house, they are more aware of other women’s make-up than their own.

The truth is that by the time they get to work most people have forgotten what they saw in the mirror early in the morning – sadly, by Monday morning many people have forgotten what they heard in the sermon on Sunday. What they heard on the Sunday morning or Sunday evening went in one ear and out the other. By Monday morning they had forgotten the sermon. But that’s a travesty of listening to God’s word, says James. Don’t just listen – do something! Put it into practice!

**“Those who look closely into the perfect law that sets people free, who keep paying attention to it and do not simply listen and then forget it, but put it into practice – they will be blessed by God in what they do”** (1.25).

I love that description of God’s Word – it is **“the perfect law that sets people free”**: i.e. it sets us free from self and from preoccupation with self to serve God, and in serving him to know his blessing on our life.

But we will only experience his blessing as we pay attention to what we hear.

My friends, this is one reason for bringing a Bible along to church – it allows us to focus more clearly on what God is saying.

From generalities, James then turns to specifics. He gives three examples of putting God’s Word into practice.

**First**, he says: **“If you do not control your tongue, your religion is worthless and you deceive yourself”** (1.26). You may have really entered into the worship – you may sung your heart out and lifted your arms in praise; you may entered into the prayers and said the heartiest of ‘Amens’; you may have listened

intently to the sermon and made copious notes – but if after the service you began to bad-mouth and criticise others, then frankly your worship was just a lot of hot air. Don't kid yourself: churchgoing which does not result in positive uplifting conversations is an absolute sham.

The *second* example of genuine religion is that we “**take care of orphans and widows in their suffering**” (1.27). Remember, that James is writing before the day of the welfare state. State benefits are a very recent phenomenon. Orphans and widows were therefore examples of people in particular need. In highlighting their needs, James was recalling a theme often found in the OT. In Jer 7, for instance, we find the prophet attacking the religious of his day, who worshipped God in the Temple, but oppressed the orphans and the widows: “**Change the way you are living... Be fair in your treatment of one another. Stop taking advantage of aliens, orphans and widows**” (Jer 7.5). James too calls us to care for the powerless, for the oppressed, for those who do not have the resources to care for themselves. Or as Peterson puts it in *The Message*: “*Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight*”. James doesn't want people to stop going to church – but he does want their religion to be real.

The *third* example of real religion is “**to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world**” (1.27). Yes, we need to look after others – but we also need to look after ourselves. But looking after ourselves does not mean feathering our own nest, but rather ensuring that we are not squeezed into the world's mould. Real religion means ensuring that we are as much God's man or woman on a Monday as we are on a Sunday.

## 2. DON'T BE A SNOB – FOCUS ON THE POOR

“**My brothers and sisters, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, you must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance**” (2.1). I.e. Christians should never show favouritism to people on the ground of their income or indeed on the ground of their colour. There is no place for prejudice in the Christian church – whether it be class prejudice, gender prejudice, age prejudice, or race prejudice. Elitism, sexism, ageism, and racism have no place in the church.

At this point, however, James focuses on sin of being a snob.

2.2-4: “**Suppose a rich man wearing a gold ring and fine clothes comes to your meeting, and a poor man in ragged clothes also comes. If you show more respect to the well-dressed man and say to him, ‘Have this best seat here’, but say to the poor man, ‘Stand over there, or sit here on the floor by my feet, then you are guilty of creating distinctions among yourselves and of making judgments based on evil motives**”.

I would like to think that that kind of thing would never happen here at Central Baptist Church – we talk about diversity being the name of the game – that we are a church to which everybody is welcome, whatever their social standing.

If the truth be told, we are quite a mix. Yet do we truly represent the economic diversity of life here in Chelmsford? I'm not so sure.

James gives three reasons not to favour well-to-do people.

**First** of all, Jesus didn't. **"My brothers and sisters, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, you must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearance"** (2.1).

I find it significant that James here mentions **Jesus** – indeed, apart from the very first verse of the letter in which he introduces himself as **"the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ"** (1.1) this is his only reference to Jesus.

In particular he describes Jesus as **"the Lord of glory"**. When Jesus became man, he left the glory of heaven and became one of us – what's more, when he became one of us, he became one with the poor. Jesus was born in no palace, but rather in a manger. Jesus was brought up in a working-class home – his father was a carpenter.

In his ministry he associated with the ordinary folk – and with those on the edge of society. Jesus never deliberately sought out the well-to-do of his day – and neither should we. Jesus treated everybody equally.

**Secondly**, it doesn't make sense to pander to the rich – because in God's sight it's not the poor, but the rich, who are the real losers in life. **"Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! God chose the poor people of this world to be rich in faith and to possess the kingdom which he promised to those who love him. But you dishonour the poor"** (2.5-6a).

It was Abraham Lincoln who once said, that *"God must love the common people because He made so many of them"*. But that isn't James argument.

His point is that the poor are **"rich in faith"**. The poor are rich in the sense that they are more likely to be open to God and his love – they **"possess the kingdom"**.

As one commentator put it: *"The Christian with the 'promise of the kingdom' has far better prospects than the man with a rich old aunt in a nursing home"* (David Field). Jesus shocked his disciples once when he said: **"It will be very hard for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God"** (Matt 19.23). Why? Because their very riches all too often blind them to their spiritual poverty.

Furthermore, says James, **"Who are the ones who oppress you and drag you before the judges? The rich! They are the ones who speak evil of that good name which has been given to you"** (2.6-7). To side with the rich in James' time didn't make sense – for by and large they were the enemies of the church.

**Thirdly**, focussing on the rich breaks God's law. 2.8: **"You will be doing the right thing if you obey the law of the Kingdom, which is found in the scripture, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'"**.

It has been said: *"Favouritism sometimes looks like love. The snob will do anything to be friends with someone he admires. But this kind of 'love' is really only selfishness in disguise. It only lasts as long as the glamour. When the hero falls from fame, it melts away like a slab of butter in the sun"* (David Field).

If we are to love our neighbour, then we can't have favourites.

Loving our neighbour requires an openness to friendship with any neighbour – regardless of their wealth, position, status, influence, race, appearance, attractiveness, dress, abilities, personality or whatever.

What's more, says James, it's more important to love your neighbour than not committing murder or not committing adultery. Or rather, loving your neighbour is a much bigger command – it includes not committing murder and not committing adultery, but it goes much further. The fact is, says James in 2.9: **“If you treat people according to their outward appearance, you are guilty of sin, and the Law condemns you as a lawbreaker”**.

### 3. GIVE US THE WORKS – AND NOT JUST THE WORDS

As the Good News of Jesus was taken from city to city, one thing stuck out above the rest: ‘God wants faith’. “Turn away from your sins and believe the Gospel” Peter and Paul declared.

This preaching of the need to have faith hit many a Jew between the eyes, The had been taught that God wants ‘works’ – he wants ‘action’. *‘Keep the letter of God’s laws’* said the rabbis, *‘and you will earn God’s favour’*. By contrast the Christian preachers declared that our best will never be good enough for God – we can never earn God’s favour – we can never work our passage to heaven. Rather, Jesus – and Jesus alone – is our ticket to heaven. Turn away from your sins and put your trust in him.

Alas, there were some Christians who misunderstood, if not perverted, the teaching of Peter and Paul. For they said to themselves – and indeed to others: *‘If God only wants our faith, then he can’t be interested in our actions. So long as we keep on believing, then it doesn’t matter what we do’*.

Nonsense, says James. **“My brothers and sisters, what good is it for people to say that they have faith if their actions do not prove it? Can their faith save them?”** (2.14). Of course not! Faith must issue into action.

It is as though a man says he loves his wife, but never does anything for her. That’s not love.

Or as James puts it: **“Suppose there are brothers or sisters who needs clothes and doesn’t have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, ‘God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!’ – if you don’t give them the necessities of life”** (2.15).

It’s not enough to shed a tear when we see pictures of the starving on the television, nor is it not enough to pray for the hungry before we tuck into a two or three course meal. Faith which does not do reach for the cheque book or do something else positive is a sham – it is not faith.

**“If it [faith] is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead”** (2.17).

Concrete actions are needed – not pious benedictions!

James goes on to hammer this point home

**“Show me how anyone can have faith without actions. I will show you my faith by my actions”** (2.18). God wants works – not just words. God wants Christians to be active in good works.

Then comes the knock-out punch: **“Do you believe that there is only one God? Good! The demons also believe – and tremble with fear”** (2.19). I.e. any honest demon can say the creed. Indeed, according to Mark, the very first person to recognise Jesus as the Son of God was a demon (see 5.7)!

It's not enough to believe.

Believing must affect the way we live.

Indeed, the way in which we act shows the genuineness of our faith

To use the jargon, its not 'orthodoxy' (right believing) which counts, but 'orthopraxis' (right living).

At this point James goes on to give two Old Testament examples of people of faith: Abraham and Rahab. In very different ways, both showed their faith by their actions.

2.26: **“So then”**, James concludes, **“as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without actions is dead”**. *“Believing without doing is like a corpse made up to look like a chorus girl. It makes God sick!”* (David Field).

To quote the title of this sermon: 'religion must be real'.

Real religion is a life lived out for God, a life lived out in service for others.

There is no place for easy believism. Faith always reaches out to the neighbour.

Faith always issues in practice.