

James 1:17–27 (The Message)

Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures.

Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.

Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. *Act* on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action.

Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

Worthless Religion

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: August 30, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: James 1:17-27

Historical details about the letter of James have eluded Biblical interpreters from the time of the early church. Was it written by James the brother of Jesus? When was it written? Where was it written? The answers to these questions and many more are uncertain. But if the historical details of the Letter of James are unclear, its message is anything but. Let your actions do your talking. Let your faith be expressed by what you do.

The message we often take from the New Testament letters is that faith is what saves us. Have faith, and by God's grace and mercy our sins are forgiven, and we are set free.

But James strikes a different tone. "Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like," says James. They are like someone who piously goes to church on Sunday, and goes to work on Monday with barely a memory of Sunday's message.

It's worse than that, though, James says. It's going to work on Monday and saying you are religious all the while doing things that contradict what your religion says. James tells us, "Anyone who sets himself up as 'religious' by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air." James gets right to the point, doesn't he?

I suppose most of us feel the pinch of James's indictment. Most of us try to live well, I think, but like Paul we can confess that we do things we don't want to do and fail to do things we ought to do. On Monday memory of Sunday fades a bit. There's no doubt that James wants to hold us all accountable, to remind us that we should try to conform our actions to our beliefs. There's no question that he's talking to all of us about our day to day failures to live up to the teachings of our faith.

That said, James also has bigger fish to fry. James is especially concerned by those who talk a good game about being religious but who delude themselves. He's most concerned not about those say they are religious and can't quite live up to what they profess. He's most concerned with those who say they are religious and who then delude themselves by distorting their religion beyond recognition. He's most concerned by those who proclaim their religion loudly on Monday but whose words and actions betray them.

Edwin Lyngar wrote in "Salon" magazine recently, "It is one of the great ironies of contemporary American politics that, while The New Testament is further to the left than "The Communist Manifesto," somehow the book and much of the religion it created have been subsumed by the cruelest, most selfish ... politics I've seen in my lifetime, replete with outright hatred toward poor people, immigrants and every other unwashed commoner for which Jesus professed his most intimate love."

This is the religious crisis in the United States today. Often it is described as a dispute between liberal and conservative religion, or between progressive and literal reading of the Bible. But that is a gigantic mischaracterization. Let me speak plainly. As James would say it, we are talking about religion that is willfully self-deceiving, willfully hot air.

I consider myself on what is often the progressive end of the spectrum. Maybe many of you do, too. Progressive is a pretty vague term, but it will do. Among the things I mean by it, I believe that the Bible is inspired by God, but I do not believe that God dictated every word of it verbatim. That is, I believe that the human Biblical writers faithfully described their encounter with God. But sometimes they may have misheard. Sometimes what they wrote got mixed up over the ages of scribal copying. Over time the church selected books to include in the Bible that, to the best of its ability, represented an account of God's relationship with God's people. It's not a perfect user's guide. There are places where it's hard to understand. There are places where it says one thing and then an opposite thing somewhere else. But overall, it is Holy Scripture, a set of stories and writings to help us in our own encounter with God.

My mother's people were Southern Baptists, and they had a decidedly more literal take on the Bible. Our views on the Bible differed in many ways, to be certain. Yet there was very little acrimony, and we saw things we liked in each other's views. I envied the way in which Bible reading and memorization was so important to them, and I owe much of my Biblical knowledge to the start they gave me. On the other hand, I think some of them may have envied the fact that I wasn't very worried about the difference between the Biblical and scientific accounts of creation. And one thing was certain. We pretty much agreed on what the Bible and our Christian faith required of us. And in my mother's family I found people who lived their faith in a way that I continue to admire and aspire to. One such person was my mother's brother Crosby. Some of you may remember stories I've told of him before, but I hope you'll forgive me another opportunity.

Like my mother, Crosby grew up in the cotton fields of mid-Louisiana. It was always a hard life and almost impossible during the great depression of the 1930s. Life was on the edge of a precipice. I have heard them all tell of the hand breaking work of scraping and tanning cowhides and of dawn to dusk days spent in the cotton fields, all just barely to get by. Every family depended on such work and the crops and the animals they raised for survival.

Nearby to my uncle Crosby's place lived a black family, in the same straits as everyone else, but whose survival was made doubly difficult because of their color in a deeply racist society. Crosby's neighbor family had an old tractor that barely ran. It was held together by tin cans, wire and prayers. And one year, right at the beginning of the planting season, it quit running and couldn't be fixed with the usual materials. Charlie, the father of the family, was at wits end. There was no money for expensive repairs, and the tractor was beyond fixing anyway. Without a crop in the ground, his family wouldn't make it. Finally, in desperation, Charlie decided to walk over to Crosby's house, just to see if there were any chance that his white neighbor would let his black neighbor borrow his tractor. It was a desperate long shot for Charlie, but there was no option but to risk humiliation in an attempt to save his family.

Though I was not yet born, I have a deeply vivid picture of the conversation in my mind. I can see Charlie standing in the damp lush smells of a Louisiana spring, sensing on the one hand that the rich earth was ready for planting and on the other hand fearfully apprehensive that he might not get the crop in the ground. I can see Charlie uneasily walking to Crosby's. I can see Charlie desperately tell his neighbor that his tractor has finally quit for good and ask if he might borrow Crosby's. And I can hear Crosby say the words that have been repeated to me over the years, "No, Charlie, I'm not going to lend you my tractor." Crosby said, "I want you to take that tractor on home with you and keep it." And then Crosby went out and bought another used tractor with the meager savings his family had left.

I remember Crosby this morning because I think he got the Bible and religion right. Crosby never seemed so interested in defending the historical facts in the Bible as he did in believing that the Gospel compelled a way of living and moving and being in the world. The truth in the Bible, as Crosby saw it, was found in how it called him to live out his faith, how it called him to relate to others. Crosby was an imperfect human being in a most imperfect society, no question about that. But he believed that where the standards of society and his own self-interest differed from the commands of his faith found in the Bible, he was meant to choose his faith.

The latter third of the twentieth century posed considerable challenges to both religion and society. Some Biblical conservatives, like the Southern Baptists, became very concerned that some of their Bible scholars, teachers and ministers were moving away from fundamentalism. At the same time social conservatives were horrified by the liberalizing trajectory of American society. There was substantial overlap in these two groups. Many believed that the liberalizing of society was caused by the secularizing of society or the waning of a fundamentalist faith. The Southern Baptist Convention was ferociously taken over by forces that wanted to marshal fundamentalism to combat social liberalism. Seminary professors and administrators were fired. Ministers were fired and sanctioned. What had historically been a stalwart of individual autonomy, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted creeds and statements of faith to remove individuals and institutions that didn't toe the line. It came to its zenith in 2000 when the Southern Baptist Convention removed a key phrase from its confession. The Southern Baptists removed from its statement of belief these words: "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." It was a stunning move for a church that had always put Jesus at the center. But the Convention realized that many of the liberal ideas they were so against could be traced back to Jesus, so Jesus had to take a back seat.

It was a deft move to get Jesus out of the way. With Jesus sidelined they could raise high distractions, like the historicity of the creation story and the literal truth of minor codes from Leviticus, and claim them to be the main focus of the Bible. Those who disagreed, they said, have fallen prey to secular forces.

It is hard to overestimate just how completely this move has cut certain forms of Bible based religious faith off at the knees. Where once most Christians would have agreed that the first question one might ask is what would Jesus do, the first question many ask today is where can I find snippets in the Bible to prove that the liberal agenda is sacrilegious?

I think of Charlie and Crosby on that Louisiana spring eighty years ago, and I weep that the faith that animated them has been replaced by a much uglier version in which, as Lyngar writes, it is religiously acceptable to express "outright hatred toward poor people, immigrants and [others for whom] Jesus professed his most intimate love."

James has it right, "This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world." Amen.