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The Danger of “Auditing” the Christian Faith

James 1:22-27

My guess is that the majority of people here today have at one time or another throughout their educational experience *audited* a class or course, whether in high school or more likely in college. I certainly have. I loved the courses I audited. After I had graduated from Dallas Seminary in 1977 I returned a couple of years later and audited beginning Hebrew which was being taught by my good friend Jack Deere.

I had already taken two years of Hebrew but I wanted to brush up and refresh myself. It was great just sitting there and listening without the pressure of having to know it well enough to pass an exam. I watched with a degree of joy and satisfaction, as well as relief, as the other students memorized words and paradigms and verb forms, wondering if they would remember it all well enough to pass. I just listened and learned at my own pace and then walked away without having to “do” a thing. It was the same in other classes I audited. I didn’t have the pressure of conducting research or writing a term paper or being prepared should the professor have asked me a question. It was great.

And the best thing of all in auditing a course like that is that you didn’t even have to show up for class if you didn’t want to. The professor couldn’t rebuke you for being absent. Your overall grade point average remained unaffected, even if you chose never to attend class. If you preferred to sleep in or stay out late or hang out with friends, everything was a go. There was never any fear of consequences.

Tragically, many approach the Christian faith and life in much the same way. *They treat Christianity much like a college course they’re auditing. They show up when they feel like it, learn about as much as they please, but never feel as if they have to “do” anything. They soak up knowledge, enjoy the music, make friends with the people around them, but feel no urgency or obligation to do anything beyond sitting and listening. They are what James calls “hearers” of the Word “only”, but not “doers”.*

These are the people in local churches, like Bridgeway, who are thrilled to “receive with meekness the implanted word” (James 1:21a). They love listening. They look forward to soaking in the sermon. But they are deceived. They have been duped into thinking that hearing and believing is all that is required. Orthodoxy is all that matters. As far as they are concerned, making certain that all their doctrinal ducks are properly aligned is the sum and substance of Christianity. These are the people who can argue your ears off. They understand the complex intricacies of Christian theology and are rather proud of their intellectual achievements.

They also typically look down their spiritual noses at people who are more concerned than they are with reaching the lost and ministering to the poor and laboring in the interests of racial reconciliation. It’s not uncommon for such folk to greatly emphasize the grace of God and accuse others of putting too much emphasis on works.

Like so many in college classrooms across the country, *they are “auditing” the Christian faith. They hear, but they don’t do. They listen and learn, but rarely if ever put into practice what they know. They rest rather smugly in the extent of their knowledge, but rarely express it in concrete actions of obedience and compassion and sacrifice.*

Here in James 1:22-27 our author is making the critically important point that the “word” of God is not something merely to be *believed* but also something to *obey*. The collective revelation that God has made of himself in Jesus Christ in the Scriptures must never be thought of as nothing more than a list of doctrines that call for our consent. Should we believe every jot and tittle in the Bible? Absolutely yes! Every word, every syllable, every sentence is the product of the creative breath of God. Do you want truth? You find it in the Bible? Do you want to know right from wrong? You find it in the Bible. Do you want to understand who God is and why this universe exists and what God’s purpose is in redeeming and forgiving people like you and me? The answers are found in the Bible.

But the Bible is not just an answer book. It’s more than a theological encyclopedia. Don’t ever think of the Bible as an inspired version of Siri on spiritual steroids. The Bible is not meant simply to satisfy your mental and theological curiosity. The Scriptures were not given so that you can impress others with how much information and insight you can cram into your brain. ***The Scriptures were given so that in knowing truth we might live it, in understanding God and his purposes we might practice it, and in gaining insight and discernment we might conduct ourselves in such a way that God is truly honored and people are blessed.***

Last week we looked closely at James’ exhortation that we “receive with meekness the implanted word,” because it has the power to “save” our souls (James 1:21). And I told you that a lot of people resonate more than others with that responsibility. I also noted last week that others more

quickly and readily respond to the exhortation in James 1:22 that we be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.” So, if you were uncomfortable last week, you are probably feeling pretty good today. And if last week’s message got your juices flowing, you may struggle a bit with what we are about to see in James 1:22-27.

Let me say again, as I did last week, that *orthodoxy*, or right belief, and *orthopraxy*, or right behavior, can never, ever be separated in God’s economy. One must never be elevated above the other. One must never be subordinated to the other. Good theology must never be played off against good behavior. Good behavior must never be sacrificed at the altar of clear thinking. If ever there were a both/and in the Christian life, it is here.

“Be Doers of the Word”

It is quite instructive for us to note that in v. 22 James uses *the noun “doers”* rather than *the verb “doing”*. It is one thing to be doing the Word, a little here and a little there, a bit on Monday and a bit more on Thursday. It is altogether something else to be the sort of person who is so characterized by and known for righteous living, day in and day out, that you are rightly called a “doer” of the Word.

In other words, the noun “doer” suggests someone whose routine habit in life is the performance of what he believes to be right and true. These are people who make the “doing” of God’s Word the business of their life. It is their job, their hobby, their passion all wrapped up into one. Doing what God has commanded permeates everything about them: their values, their words, their conduct, their relationships, the way they use money, their sexual behavior, everything!

We often start off a conversation with someone we don’t know well by asking: “So, what is your occupation? What do you *do*?” Typical responses are: “I’m a teacher” or a “lawyer” or a “salesman” or a “stay-at-home-mom” or a “student” or something similar. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could without the slightest degree of arrogance and pride answer that question by saying: “I’m a *doer* of God’s Word”?

Note well. He doesn’t say that all you are is a “doer” of the Word. You must first be a “hearer”. ***It is possible to be a “doer” only just as it is possible to be a “hearer” only.*** To be a “hearer” only leads to arrogance and pride and self-sufficiency and an argumentative attitude. But to be a “doer” only leads to self-righteousness and self-reliance and often times to theological heresy.

Is there a priority in the two? No, but there is a proper sequence. One must first “hear” before he can properly “do”. If you start doing before hearing you’re likely to end up thinking that

Christianity is little different from the social activism in our world. You may end up doing the wrong things and for the wrong reasons! You have to know what is right and good and eternal lest you end up doing things that are wrong and bad and transient.

But James wants us to understand that if we stop with hearing we are little more than overblown brains, big heads whose hearts are shrunken and whose souls are small.

Sometimes we fall into the trap of supposing that *thinking* about what is good is the same as the *doing* of what is good. We are deceived into supposing that we are less selfish because we admire the virtue of altruism. We think because we admire humility that we are for that reason alone less proud than others. We do not achieve virtue or goodness in life merely by paying tribute to such values and confessing their absence in our hearts. They have to be seen in our lives and in how we relate to others.

“The Perfect Law of Liberty”

In vv. 23-25 James proceeds to illustrate his point. One may look at one's face in a mirror and then go away without doing anything about the untidiness it reveals. You look in the mirror and get a good idea in your head of what you see, and as you walk away someone stops you and asks: “What did your experience of looking in the mirror achieve for you?” You respond: “It gave me a good idea of what I look like.” To which they respond by saying: “Uh, I hate to have to say this, but you *still* look that way! You're just as disheveled and unkempt as you were when you first took a glance at yourself. Why did you bother to look in the mirror if you never intended to clean up and comb your hair and wipe the dirt from your forehead and that streak of lipstick across your cheek? Didn't you see that piece of broccoli stuck between your teeth?”

James is telling us that spiritual primping is a good thing. We are to closely examine God's Word, that is to say, we are to gaze intently into the mirror of Scripture and take note of the reflection of ourselves we see there, and then we must do something about it. We must tend to each unsightful blemish and put in place each wayward hair. The Scriptures are a spiritual mirror, designed to expose and reveal our condition. The principles of God's Word tell us what is out of sync with God's will. It brings conviction to our hearts about the ways in which we are offending our heavenly Father. But to see that, to know that, even to feel that, and then do nothing, is as absurd as the self-absorbed lady or man who stares at their reflection in the mirror, taking note of every blemish and stain and then walking away without doing a thing!

Note that the “word” of God is here called the “*perfect law of liberty*”. Is this a contradiction in terms? *How can something legal liberate?* Doesn’t “law” enslave us and restrict our behavior? How can you experience liberty from something that is law? Some Christians don’t like to think of anything in the NT as “law”. They say things like: “I thought we were delivered from the law. Isn’t my relationship with God characterized entirely by grace?”

This response shows that they misunderstand two things. First, we have been delivered from the “law” in the sense that that we cannot gain acceptance with God by obeying it. No one is justified by works of law. Obedience to the “law” of God does not gain or merit salvation for us. That is clear in Scripture. Furthermore, to be delivered from the “law” means that we are no longer subject to its power to judge us or condemn us. Jesus endured the law’s penalty for us when he died on the cross.

Second, people fail to realize that we are now subject to the “law” of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). In other words, the wide variety of commandments and exhortations and moral principles we find in the NT are there to govern our behavior. So, for example, when James said in 1:21 that we should “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness” he is articulating a moral “law” to which we as Christians are obligated. When he says “be doers of the word” (1:22a) he is telling us to obey the “law” of Christ. We don’t obey this “law” to win God’s favor or earn forgiveness or coerce him to love us. We obey precisely because our relationship with God is based entirely on grace. Grace instructs us to obey. Grace encourages us to obey. Grace empowers us to obey.

So never forget that God’s law feels oppressive and restricting only when it prohibits us from doing what our sinful nature desires or when it commands something our sinful nature resists. But for the person whose will is in conformity with God’s will the law is truly liberating. *True freedom isn’t the power to do whatever you want, but the heartfelt desire to do what God wants.*

“True, Pure Religion”

James isn’t content to simply tell us the importance of right behavior. General principles only get you so far. So he turns in vv. 26-27 to provide us with three specific examples of what “doing” the implanted word looks like.

Before we look at these three examples, let me say something about the word translated “religious” in v. 26 and “religion” in v. 27. Today, the word “religion” is out of style. In fact, it is often thought to be synonymous with legalism and externalism. By externalism I mean an approach to life where the only thing that matters is behavioral conformity to a set of rules. The Pharisees were profoundly “religious” because in terms of what you could see, they obeyed the

law with meticulous detail. But internally they were devoid of true love for God. Religion, then, is considered by many today to be equivalent to a rigid and lifeless traditionalism.

We often contrast “religion” with the “gospel” and urge one another to avoid the former and embrace the latter. But it wasn’t until the late 20th century that “religion” became a cuss word in Christian circles. Here in James and throughout church history it simply referred to the totality of one’s ultimate allegiance and commitment. Your “religion” encompassed both what you believe and how you behave. It was possible, then, to have a good “religion” and to be “religious” in a way that honored God and blessed people.

I would even go so far as to say that the word “religious” in vv. 26-27 is synonymous with faith in Jesus Christ. I say this because of what follows immediately in James 2:1. There James says, “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (James 2:1). In other words, as far as James is concerned, “religion” is the same thing as your confession of faith in Jesus as Lord. And he’s going to tell us what good and godly “religion” is in vv. 26-27. He focuses on three things: ***our speech, our service, and our separation***.

(1) Speech (James 1:26)

Try to imagine a person who obeys the rules and never steals or lies or betrays a confidence, a person who is generous with his/her money and appears to love their spouse, but continually berates other people and demeans them and lets fly with vulgarities and profane speech. They are critical and sarcastic and judgmental even though they seem to always abide by the rules.

This is the person who sings loudly and passionately, having memorized the words to every song, serves in children’s ministry and hands out bulletins, but gossips and slanders and undermines others with his mouth. He has in mind the sort of person who pretends to be religious or spiritual and yet talks just like the world does. What he has “heard” in terms of the Word of God has made very little difference in his speech.

James says it as clearly and forcefully as he can. He pulls no punches. The simple spiritual reality is this: ***If you say you are religious, if you say you love Jesus, but you don’t bridle your tongue but are given to gossip and slander and profanity and angry speech and destructive verbal criticism, your “faith” is worthless. Your so-called “religion” amounts to nothing. Your so-called “Christianity” is a sham!***

I know the pushback coming my way. I can hear some of you saying: “Wait a minute, Sam. It sounds as if you are saying that we are saved by our speech. It sounds as if you are telling us that whether or not we are truly born again is dependent upon how we use our tongues. Is that what you are saying?” No. It isn’t.

What I’m saying is that how you use your tongue is *indicative* of whether or not you are born again. Your words serve as the *evidence* of whether or not your claim to be a follower of Jesus is genuine. Your words are like a moral thermometer that reveals the spiritual temperature of your heart. When a person is born again and devotes his/her life to Christ there will be a transformation in how they make use of their speech. That doesn’t mean the moment we are converted we suddenly experience a complete change in our speech patterns. It does mean that there is set in motion a progressive refining and purifying and transformation in how we speak. The mouth reveals the condition of the heart. Jesus said it in Matthew 12:34 – ***“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”***

Now, I must say that there is yet another way of interpreting this text. Some argue that when James says that “this person’s religion is *worthless*” (v. 26) he simply means it is ineffective; it accomplishes nothing of value; it fails to truly help people and truly glorify God. That is possible.

In either case, it matters immensely how we use our speech. Do we praise our spouse in public but humiliate them in private? Do we use our tongues to build up and encourage our children or to shame them? Do we publicly pledge our love for people of another ethnicity but in private speak in a way that questions their integrity or value as human beings? The answer to those questions is perhaps the clearest and most explicit measure of the value of our “religion” and our devotion to Jesus.

(2) Service – v. 27a

This is not to be taken as an exhaustive portrayal of true, God-honoring religion, as if nothing else mattered. Rather it identifies what is indispensable to religion: that apart from which good and godly religion cannot be said to exist. These are *representative* actions.

When James speaks of orphans and widows he has in mind ***any and all who are hurting and in pain and in great need*** (see Hebrews 10:32-34). He mentions orphans and widows because in the ancient world they were more vulnerable than anyone else. They were easily taken advantage of, with no one to protect them or argue their cause. Thus we hear Moses say to the people of Israel: “You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child” (Exod. 22:22; see also Deut. 14:29; 27:19; Ps. 68:5).

To “visit” the orphan or the widow or anyone who is suffering and has no one else to defend their cause or provide for their needs doesn’t mean an occasional trip to their house or to the hospital, although that is surely important. He’s talking about making sacrifices to supply their needs. He’s talking about taking their burdens onto one’s own heart. He’s talking about investing time and energy and money in their lives. To “visit” the orphan may entail adoption. To “visit” the widow may entail mowing her grass and painting her house and inviting her over for dinner on a regular basis or inviting her to join your community group. This sort of service is religion as religion ought to be.

(3) Separation – v. 27b

The sort of “separation” he has in view here does not require that one leave the world or live in a cave or hide behind closed doors. The “separation” in view is not physical or spatial; it’s moral and spiritual. He is talking about walking in moral, financial, and sexual integrity in the midst of a fallen and filthy society.

By the way, I find it highly instructive that the person who knows and loves Jesus is the one who cares about ***both public compassion and justice on the one hand, and private purity and morality on the other***. It’s quite tragic that our political process has degenerated to such an extent that both Republicans and Democrats caricature one another. The Democrat says to the Republican:

“You preach to us about sexual morality and personal integrity at the same time you neglect the poor and homeless and disenfranchised all around you.”

And the Republican says to the Democrat:

“You argue that we should increase welfare payments to the poverty-stricken and raise taxes on the wealthy, but you ignore the plague of abortion and tell us that an individual’s personal and sexual conduct is none of our business.”

In other words, there is wisdom here for the leftward-leaning Democrat and the rightward leaning Republican. To the Republican, James says: “Be committed to concrete acts of kindness and generosity and practical deeds of compassion.” To the Democrat, James says: “Your personal life does matter. Sexual purity and financial integrity and a thought life not given to lust or pornography are crucial.”

Is that a simplistic and somewhat unfair portrayal? Probably. The fact is, there are many Democrats who are devoted to personal purity and many Republicans who fight for social justice. What's important for us to remember is that as far as James is concerned true Christianity must actively pursue both. Irrespective of our political affiliation, ***both our public and our private lives matter to God! Concrete actions of compassion and love for the orphan and the widow are absolutely essential. And so too is a commitment to sexual purity and financial integrity.***

Conclusion

Last week I posed the question: “Which is more important – *orthodoxy* or *orthopraxy*? What matters more – what you *believe* or how you *behave*? Is Christianity a *creed* to be confessed or a *life* to be lived? To what should we energetically devote ourselves – *hearing* God's Word or *doing* God's Word?” And the simple, straightforward answer is: “Yes!” I can't say it any better than does James: “Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:21b-22a).