

“Walking the Talk”

James 1:19-27

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(Anger; Genuine Christianity)

Have you ever heard of a “lapsed” Catholic?

They were raised Catholic, maybe even when to Catholic schools, but they no longer go to confession, pray the Rosary, or even believe most of what they had been taught.

Have you heard of a “jack” Mormon or a “cultural” Muslim?

You can easily guess that each describes someone who once claimed an allegiance to that particular religion but no longer lives it.

Have you heard of a “nominal” Christian?

“Nominal” means “in name only.”

It describes millions of Americans, who were raised in Protestant or Catholic families but as adults their Christianity has no real bearing on their lives, even if they may still go through certain religious motions such as attending church.

Many surveys have been done in recent years demonstrating that a high percentage of people who call themselves “Christians” have worldviews, values and lifestyles that are no different from those who make no claim to be “Christian.”

Their choices in entertainment, their beliefs about premarital sex, abortion and homosexuality, their primary pursuit of pleasure and plenty, and the unavailability of their time and money to help others are the same as the general population.

These are “nominal,” in name only, Christians.

In the biblical text before us today, James draws a sharp distinction between true and false Christianity.

It is a text that might make us uncomfortable.

**He says you can tell a real Christian by his or her conduct.**

James won't allow for merely a private spirituality.

There are some who would say, "I'm a Christian. I believe in God and Jesus."

There are others reared in evangelical homes and churches who would add, "I asked Jesus into my heart when I was 6" (or whatever age).

Still others who might say, "We can't judge each other, because we can't tell what's in another person's heart."

And so we accept the idea that one can be a Christian in the private interior place of the mind even if there is no evidence in the exterior actions of life.

James will have none of that!

As you will hear in a minute, James says there is a lot of self-deception going on, especially on this issue of our relationship with God.

This is a huge reality check for a lot of superficially religious or superficially spiritual people.

But it also gives even the person who takes his faith very seriously cause to evaluate his life.

Listen carefully to the Word God given to us through James, the brother of our Lord Jesus.

James 1:19-27

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,<sup>20</sup> for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.<sup>22</sup> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.<sup>23</sup> Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror<sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.<sup>25</sup> But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—

he will be blessed in what he does. <sup>26</sup> If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

The relationship of these verses to the previous verses and to the following verses is maybe best seen by giving a very broad outline of the entire book.

I'm indebted to Craig Blomberg, in his yet unpublished commentary on James, for this outline.

In the first 12 verses, James mentions the three main themes he will deal with in the book:

1:1-12 initiates the three themes:

- 2-5 trials
- 6-8 wisdom for living
- 9-11 rich and poor

In the rest of the first chapter he reiterates those three themes:

1:12-27 reiterates the three themes:

- 12-18 Trials/temptation
- 12-26 Wisdom for living
- 27 rich and poor

We looked ever so briefly, last week at verses 12-18 and this week we look at the rest of the chapter, dealing again with wisdom for living.

In the rest of the letter, James will expand on those three themes:

2:1-5:18 expands the three themes:

- 2:1-26 rich and poor
- 3:1-4:12 Wisdom and speech
- 4:13-5:18 trials & Temptations

Because James both begins and ends his letter on the subject of persevering in the midst of trials and temptations I think it is possible that the entire letter is designed to help Christians persevere.

In the passage before us today, he is going to deal with our reaction to the word and will of God in our lives.

Real Christians, live it; they walk the talk.

Again, James makes us uncomfortable because he doesn't coddle or pamper us.

When my son played sports in the YMCA leagues, everyone was a winner; everyone got the same "participation" award.

Everybody was treated the same whether they could actually play the sport or not.

In contrast, James treats us like adults. He says in essence, "man up!"

Stop deceiving yourselves – either you walk the talk or the truth is you don't have it.

A relationship with God and the right reaction to his Word **looks** like something – you can tell the real thing.

Verse 19 sets the agenda for the rest of the chapter:

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry..."

Notice that in what follows James deals with these same three ideas, though he takes them out of order:

Verses 20-21 deal with anger;  
verses 22-25 deal with listening;  
and verse 26 deals with speaking.

Verse 27 comes back, again, to something of what being a real Christian means.

**All the verses together are going to show us something of what a real Christian looks like.**

**Specifically they will speak to the issue of how a real Christian responds to the Word of God, the will of God.**

**I. Though he only briefly touches on it, James begins by saying we are to be "slow to become angry."**

That certainly leaves the door open for some anger.

Paul, likewise, speaks of being angry without sinning, which suggests some anger is okay.

We like to call it “righteous” anger.

But the truth is that few of us (certainly not me) can legitimately speak of expressing righteous anger, because even in our best moments our motives are so complicated that we have lots of other kinds of anger mixed in.

I had spoken on the subject of biblical manhood and womanhood. And a person wrote to me a week later saying:

I have waited a week to write to you so I would not write in a fit of emotion and so I could check my perceptions with others. “It was the most conservative, traditionalist sermon I have ever heard on the question in my life. One thing that I find troubling about your sermon was the sloppy exegesis used to support your position.”

Three pages later, he concluded, “You have closed the door. I see no possibility for further growth, or influence, or ministry for me in the church. I would therefore be grateful if you would remove my name from the membership list. I cannot stand before God with a clear conscience, and be part of a church that does not...teach the truth about the full liberty and equality to be found in Christ.”

Now the author of that letter was considerably younger than me, had not had any theological training, and had a particular agenda they had been pushing in the church for some time.

When I got the letter I must admit my thoughts were not sweetness and light.

So let’s admit that James’ next statement is most often true:

James 1:20 “man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”

James has written about the trials we encounter in life.

When we think we are being unjustly treated, we get really “bent out of shape.”

And our anger begins to color everything – even our own time reading and responding to God’s Word.

We think about how such and such a sermon would sure have been good for that person to hear.

A lady, long a member of her church, shook hands with the pastor after the service one Sunday morning. “That was a wonderful sermon,” she exclaimed, “just wonderful! Everything you said applies to someone I know.” From Stephen Cole’s sermon on James 1:19-27 at [http://www.fcfonline.org/search\\_methods.asp?search=1&search\\_method=advanced&sermon\\_book=James](http://www.fcfonline.org/search_methods.asp?search=1&search_method=advanced&sermon_book=James)

And we rationalize away our responsibility by claiming we have been too offended to obey God at this time.

Our anger interferes with our ability to live as God wants us to live.

In our anger, we usually work ourselves up into quite a state of mind.

- Anger usually becomes immoderate.
- And it is expressly contrary to Jesus’ command to love our enemies.
- And it usurps God’s role as judge and vindicator (Davids, NIBC James, 39-40)
- Anger can stop us dead in our tracks in our walk with Jesus.

So James says in James 1:21 “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”

“Moral filth” and “evil” - those are strong words!

When I think of moral filth, I think of sexual perversion.

When I think of evil, I think of murder, rape and abuse.

Is James serious?

Does my anger deserve that definition?

In a passage that is quite parallel, Peter says it like this:

1 Peter 2:1-2 “Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.”

As we will see in a minute, Peter like James is talking about accepting or craving the Word of God so that by it we may be saved or said differently, continue to grow up in our salvation.

James called it “moral filth” and “evil.”

Peter calls it malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander.

When James calls it “moral filth” he is talking about all the sins against another our anger leads us into.

And James says, get rid of it and “humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”

He clearly believes we have the ability to forgive.

If we are Christians, God’s Spirit can enable us to choose to lay our anger down.

Even choosing to do so over and over again, if necessary.

Not only does James tell us to be done with the anger, but he also says in James 1:21 “humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”

The “word planted in you” is none other than the gospel that has by God’s grace, taken root in your life.

Back in 1:18 he said we have been given “birth through the word of truth.”

In verse 1:25 he will write of “the perfect law of liberty.”

In a sermon earlier this year, John Piper spoke of the internal word of God and the external word of God.

I think this helps explain what James is talking about.

The implanted word is the truth of God’s Word about Jesus and salvation in him alone that the Spirit plants internally, that we then trust for life.

Our souls require that implanted internal Word.

But our souls also require the regular feeding from the external Word – the Bible. Piper, sermon at [www.desiringgod.com](http://www.desiringgod.com) on Jan 6, 2008

James, I believe is speaking of both the internal and external Word when he says we must come to it humbly.

To come humbly is to come to the Scripture in a submissive, open-minded way, with an eager readiness to learn and with a genuine desire to bring every area of life under its reforming control.

**II. Building on that same idea, James then leaves the issue of being slow to anger, in verse 22, goes to the second issue of being quick to listen.**

James 1:22 “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

There’s a difference between “listening” and “listening.”

How many times have I told my children to do something only to have them not respond?

I will then say something like, “Are you listening?” or “Did you hear me?”

What would be the major indication that they were listening?

How would I best know they were hearing me?

If they did what I told them to do!

Pity on them if they did nothing but still said, “Yes, I heard you.”

When you read the Scriptures, do you merely move the bookmark forward or do you listen to God? (Alex Motyer, *The Message of James*, 65)

When you listen to a sermon, do you merely sit compliantly or do you listen.

In Acts 10:33 we read, “Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

But again, James put the real test to our listening when he defined it as “Do what it says.”

How are we deceived?

We deceive ourselves into thinking all is well between God and us because we’ve put in the right amount of religious “time” in church or we have said the right religious words.

James says the proof is in the “doing.”

He then uses an analogy.

James 1:23-24 It “is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror<sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”

This man “looks” – the word means he really looks, he really sees. But after seeing, he goes away and promptly forgets what he saw – he does nothing about it.

Men, last week we looked into the mirror.

We talked about moral integrity, about pornography.

What did you see? What did you do with what you saw? Did you forget about it?

But in contrast, James says in James 1:25 “But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.”

This man continues looking into the Word – continues to see himself as God sees him.

He doesn’t do it one day and quit. He keeps on doing it.

And then seeing himself, he doesn’t go away forgetting, he does something about it – he acts.

One of the surest ways to stifle our growth in Christlikeness is to refuse to obey when we have been shown something to do.

Do we know that we are to “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” and yet we hang on to anger toward someone who hurt us deeply, refusing to let it go? (Colossians 3:13)

Do we know that sharing with others the wealth God provides is our responsibility and privilege but we continue to get ourselves further and further in debt?

Do we still engage in premarital sex or indulge impure thoughts even though God said, “each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the

heathen, who do not know God... For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. (1 Thessalonians 4)

James 1:25 “The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.”

**III. But James moves along to the third issue – slow to speak:  
James 1:26 “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.**

In John Bunyon’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* there is a man - “His name is Talkative. ... He is the son of one Say-well; he dwelt in Prating (chatter) Row; and is known of all that are acquainted with him, by the name of Talkative in Prating Row; and notwithstanding his fine tongue, he is but a sorry fellow. ... for he is best abroad; near home, he is ugly enough. ... religion has no place in his heart, or house, or conversation; all the religion he has lies (only) in his tongue, and his religion is, to make a noise therewith. ... Thus say the common people that know him, ‘A saint abroad, and a devil at home.’”

Jesus said in Matthew 12:34 “Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.”

The reality of our religion is revealed by the words of our mouth.

Gossip, slander, the maligning of another’s character, angry vindictive words, belittling words, and so much more reveal the true nature of the speaker.

By outward appearances he’s religious – he attends to religious activities.

By stated preference he’s religious – he says he’s a Christian.

But he deceives himself as evidenced by his not keeping a tight rein on his tongue.

James says the truth is that his religion is worthless, empty.

Again that is a strong and uncomfortable indictment.

**IV. In verse 26 James spoke of “religion that is worthless.”  
Now he ends these remarks with a description of authentic religion.**

This is not intended as a full description of genuine Christianity but he does encompass it all when he touches on the internal and the external.

True Christianity has both interior and exterior dimensions.

First the **exterior**:

**James 1:27 “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”**

Throughout the OT and NT the writers are clear about the fact that a true relationship with God results in a concern for what concerns God.

The point is, don't pretend to love God if you don't love whom he loves.

Isaiah 1:10-17 Stop bringing meaningless offerings!...When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen...Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.”

James will have much to say on this subject in the coming chapters.

But there is as well an **interior** dimension to true Christianity.

**James 1:27 “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”**

The world's pollution is immorality, dishonesty, greed, selfishness, violence, envy, arrogance, blasphemy, cruelty, materialism, obsession with pleasure, and its rejection of God.

Do we think you can live among that all day, every day, and not be touched, influenced, and stained?

We must consciously and actively:

Reject its standards

Repulse its lies

Repel its pressures

Resist its temptations (Blanchard, 111)

Be aware of the air we breathe and stand against it by steeping ourselves in the Word of God, consciously depending upon the Spirit of God, and surrounding ourselves with the people of God.

So James gives us two descriptions of genuine Christianity:

Social justice and personal purity.

It is not either/or but both/and.

Picture an isolated, separated, inwardly focused, rule-keeping, and paranoid people identified most of all by what they don't do.

Separation alone is faulty religion.

Picture Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision whose heart bled for the poor of the world but whose family ended in shambles with children who hated him.

Or picture Martin Luther King Jr. or Ted Haggard or too many others, who led the charge for justice or compassion but lacked moral integrity.

Activism alone is faulty religion.

James 1:27 "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress **and** to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

**James never for a minute says or believes that we become Christians by doing the right things.**

**Salvation is by grace through faith not by works.**

But James joins the Apostles Paul and John and Jesus himself in saying that true salvation yields a changed and changing life.

John 14:15 “If you love me, you will obey what I command.

1 John 2:6 “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

1 John 2:15 “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

1 John 3:14 “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

Ephesians 2:8-10 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...”

John 15:8 “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Matthew 7:20-21 “by their fruit you will recognize them. <sup>21</sup> “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Oh Christian friend, we dare not be passive in our response to God’s holy Word. James 1:22 “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

And for some here, maybe this is the reality check you have needed to help you understand that **for all your pretence in the past**, you are not a Christian and you desperately need Jesus to save you from your sins and sinfulness.

Years ago Al Martin, a pastor in Pennsylvania, wrote an article titled, “What is a Christian?”

Through a mutual friend, I contacted pastor Martin and asked to reprint that article for all who come to Southern Gables.

Here are his main points:

1. According to the bible a Christian is a person who has faced realistically the problem of his own personal sin
2. A Bible Christian is one who has seriously considered the one divine remedy for sin
3. A Bible Christian is one who has wholeheartedly complied with the divine terms for appropriating the divine provision – repentance and faith.
- 4. A true Christian is a person who manifests in his life that his claims to repentance and faith are real**

Martin ends with this and so do I:

“Can you make your claim to be a Christian stick from the Bible? Does your life manifest the fruits of repentance and faith? Do you possess a life of attachment to Christ, of obedience to Christ and confession of Christ? Is your behavior marked by adherence to the ways of Christ? Not perfectly — No! Every day you must pray, ‘Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who trespass against us’. But you can also say, ‘For me to live is Christ’, or “The world behind me, the cross before me, I have decided to follow Jesus.” That is what a true Christian is. How many of us are real Christians? I leave you to answer in the deep chambers of your own mind and heart. But, remember, answer with an answer that you will be prepared to live with for eternity. Be content with no answer but that which will find you comfortable in death and safe in the day of judgment.” [http://www.the-highway.com/Gospel\\_Martin.html](http://www.the-highway.com/Gospel_Martin.html)

### **Other Notes and Texts:**

#### **“Slow to Anger”**

“Slow to anger” is a characteristic commonly used to describe God.

This anger works against the very holy living that reflects a true relationship with God.

This does not rule out true righteous anger but it does rule out our petty, self-centered hostility toward someone that has gotten in our way.

### **“Quick to listen”**

“Listen to the conversations of the world, between nations as well as between couples. They are, for the most part, dialogues of the deaf.”  
Paul Tournier, *To Understand Each Other*)

“Holiness is the visible part of salvation.” In Blanchard, *Live the Life*, 72

James “knows that mere intellectual assent is often accompanied by an anemic will in matters of morality.” Nystrom, 89

### **The relationship of law and grace:**

**“Let me quickly say that without a faith relationship with Jesus, the moral law of God is a curse. We have broken God's law, and once we have broken it, it can only condemn us. It has no power to save.** I like to compare the law of God to that little mirror on a stick which the dentist uses to examine a person's teeth. That mirror can reveal cavities, but it can do nothing to remove them. The law can reveal our sins, but it can do nothing to forgive them, nothing to remove these spiritual cavities of the soul.

Only Jesus through His perfect saving work can forgive our sin:  
Romans 8:3 For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin ...

Once Jesus forgives our sin, the law no longer condemns us.  
Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, ...

Once Jesus forgives our sin, the law is no longer a curse to us.  
Galatians 3:13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us ...

**Once Jesus forgives our sins, the moral law ceases to be a curse to us and becomes for us the perfect law of liberty. The moral law, the revealed will of God, becomes for us a perfect revelation of the sort of life that is pleasing unto God.** And living a

life pleasing to God because we truly want to is true liberty. Living a sinful life is not liberty but rather slavery to corruption and perversion. The moral law of God becomes a Christian's joy and delight. Psalm 1:1-3 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.

Romans 7:22 22 For I delight in the law of God according to the

inward man. (From Grover Gunn, James 1:22-25 sermon at <http://www.grovergunn.net/andrew/anscr.htm#59jam>)

### **“Slow to speak”:**

“The boneless tongue, so small and weak,

Can crush and kill,” declares the Greek.

“The tongue destroys a greater horde,”

The Turk asserts, “than does the sword.”

The Persian proverb wisely saith,

“A lengthy tongue – an early death.”

Or sometimes takes this form instead,

“Don’t let your tongue cut off your head.”

“The tongue can speak a word whose speed,”

Say the Chinese, “outstrips the steed.”

The Arab sages said in part,

“The tongue’s great storehouse is the heart.”

From Hebrew was the maxim sprung,

“Thy feet should slip, but ne’er the tongue.”

The sacred writer crowns the whole,

“Who keeps the tongue doth keep his soul.” (cited in Baker/Ellsworth, 43 from James

Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited*, 475)

“A wise old owl sat upon an oak,

The more he saw, the less he spoke;

The less he spoke, the more he heard.

Why aren’t we like that wise old bird?” (cited in Ellsworth and Baker, *Preaching James*, 41)

British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli said of a contemporary, “He was intoxicated with the exuberance of his own verbosity.” (in John

Blanchard, 75)

Proverbs 26:20 “Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down.”

Proverbs 17:28 “Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.

My father’s variation on that theme was “Keep your mouth shut and others won’t know how ignorant you truly are.”

Proverbs 10:19 “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.

Proverbs 29:20 “Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Matthew 22:36 “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.

## **Widows and orphans:**

Exodus 22:22 Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.

<sup>23</sup> If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.

<sup>24</sup> My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns,

<sup>29</sup> so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.

Psalm 68:5 A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

Micah 6:8 He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.