

Pure and Genuine Religion

by J. Glyn Owen

True religion is essentially a religion of the Word of God, and it begins with regeneration, continues with righteousness, and culminates in a pure and undefiled religion before God.

Duration: 1:03:31

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, James 1:19-25

Topics: "Pure Religion"

Description

In this sermon, James emphasizes the importance of being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. He urges his audience to pay special attention to his words, as he is writing with authority and under inspiration. James uses an illustration to emphasize the need to not just listen to the word of God, but to also put it into practice. He explains that true religion is centered around the Word of God and highlights three stages in the passage that demonstrate this.

Transcript

Good to see you all again this evening. And certainly a joy to have a number of visiting friends with us from different parts of the city and beyond the city. I see some very old friends from Belfast here.

It's great to see them. My eyesight is not dim as yet, and so I can see. It's great to see you.

You're looking as young as ever. The others of you will forgive me for saying that, won't you? Well now, it's the Word of God that brings us together. And it is to that that we now turn with a whole heart, and I trust, a mind prepared of the Spirit of God.

Let's turn to the book of James. And the passage that I want to take this evening begins really with verse 18. It ought to begin with verse 19, but I want to go back a step.

I have to be a little bit awkward. We have given it the title which comes from the latter part of the passage, according to the New International Version, Pure and Genuine Religion. Religion that is pure and genuine in the sight of God.

Now, from the 18th verse to the end of the chapter, James shows the intimate relationship between true religion and the Word of God. This is why I chose to begin with the 18th verse. It was, in a sense, the climax to the passage we were considering last week.

Having spoken of God as the Father of the heavenly lights, the author of every good, the giver of every good and perfect gift, James climaxed that thought with the notion that God is the giver of life to his people. Not only the things that relate to life, but of his own free will, God's free will, which is the most sacred of all wills. Of his own will, God gave us life.

But how did he do it? Well, he gave us the gift of life by his Word. And that actually introduces us to the passage that is before us tonight. Because what we have here, really, is an exposition of how true religion is essentially a religion of the Word of God.

And there are three stages in the passage. If you'd like to have them in your mind as we come to it, I think you may find it helpful. First of all, regeneration is the work of the Word of God, or of the God of the Word, or if you prefer, of God through his Word.

He chose to give us life by means of the Word of Truth. The life that he gave us by means of the Word of Truth is a life that is meant to produce righteousness. How is that righteousness produced? By the very same Word that gave us life.

And as that righteousness is being produced, so does there emerge in the life of the obedient a religion which is pure before God, and undefiled before God, and therefore wholly acceptable before God, whether it be manward or Godward, directly Godward or indirectly, it makes no matter. It is religion that is pure and blameless in the sight of God, and it is acceptable to him. So what begins with regeneration by the Word, and continues as a progressively maturing righteousness by the same Word, comes to its climax in a pure religion that is pure and wholesome in the sight of God.

Now that's the way we're going to take tonight, God helping us, and I want simply to say a few words about the first of these points because we did have something to say about verse 18 last time. But let's take it up again. The Word of God and the provision of life.

Regeneration is an act of God. He chose to give us birth. Are you a man or a woman who knows something about the rebirth? I trust every one of us does.

I trust we know what it is to have come out of the old Adamic stem and tyranny to sin, or the tyranny of sin rather, into the liberty of the sons of God and to breathe the Spirit of God and know something of the life of Christ in our own soul. But as sure as you have got there, it's the work of God. You can never look in the mirror and say, John, you've done a good job for yourself.

You can never look in the mirror and say, I've made a wonderful person of myself. If you're born again at all, you are born again because God has intruded, intervened in your life, come right into things, and thereby the Word of His truth, He has wrought the mightiest miracle of all. Now this is something we need to remember.

There is so much organizing within our religious circles. So much we have to organize. I'm not necessarily criticizing that.

There is so much we have to do. We have to plan. But not all our planning, not all our preaching, not all our singing, not all our everything put together can bring us all to birth.

Let's be absolutely certain about that. Men remain dead in sin until God steps in. And wherever you see a man who has come from death into life, you can say about that person, God has been at work there.

A Christian is a holy entity. God has made the man or the woman the person he or she is. And so, of course, God must have the glory.

And the means God employs in the regenerating act is, as we've already indicated, His own Word. There's a consistency about God's deeds, God's action. He brought the cosmos into being.

He brought the universe into being by His own Word, by the Word of His power. God said, and there was. Read that massive first chapter of Genesis again and read it prayerfully.

There's something in these words. God said, let there be, and there was. God said again, let there be, and there was.

You see, when God speaks, universes spring into existence. He's the author of life. He's the author of death.

He puts princes on their throne. He takes them down. Our God is a sovereign God.

He's the creator God. And by His Word, the Word of His mouth, He made the universe. And He sustains it by the same Word.

Now, the wonder, the wondrous thing that is brought out here is this. God made us again in exactly the same way. He spoke the Word and it was done.

That's all. When God chooses to save a man or a woman, to regenerate a man or a woman, the only thing He has to do is to utter His Word. May the Lord utter His Word tonight.

If there is anyone within these walls who is still dead in trespasses and sins, for unless he does it, not all the cajoling, not all the argumentation, not all the preaching, not all that we can do brought together can possibly bring that person to a knowledge of God in Christ. It must be the work of God, and God does it by the Word of His truth. Now, if you want a commentary on that, and I just refer to this because I'm not going to try to relate it, but if you want the best commentary on God's bringing life into existence by the Word of His power or the Word of truth, then I suggest you read the parable of the sower and the seed and the soils again.

Especially remembering that Jesus Christ identified the seed as the Word of God or the Word of the Gospel in one of the Gospels or the Word of the Kingdom in another. What was the seed that was sown that brought forth 30-fold, 60-fold, 90-fold, or 100-fold? Well, it's the Word of the Gospel. Jesus was speaking about the Gospel, about the Word of God, the Word of God and the provision of life.

When God speaks in power and in grace, He brings forth new life. And the last thing that we notice here is this. The purpose specified for the regenerating of men is this, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created.

Now, there's a story behind that. God claimed the firstfruits of man and of beast and of fruit as peculiarly His own. As we read in the Old Testament, just as the firstfruits of man and cattle were sacred to the Lord, so also the firstproduce of the vineyard, Leviticus 19, 23-25.

And the first of the annual produce of the grain, the vine, the olive oil, the sheared wool, the first of the coarse meal of honey and of all the produce of the land, they were the Lord's. The firstfruits belonged to the Lord. Of course, everything belonged to Him.

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Oh, yes, we're not denying that. But in a very special sense, the firstfruits were His.

He claimed them as peculiarly His own. So, too, the firstborn in Israel of man and of beast. And the same God claims His redeemed people as the firstfruits of His new creation.

Well, you say, if we are but the firstfruits, if the Church is but the firstfruits, what's coming after? Well, the Bible talks about a new heaven and a new earth. And you and I can spin those words off our lips very quickly and hardly recognize the mystery and the wonder and the marvel behind it. But we are but the firstfruits of what God is going to make anew out of this decrepit, sin-laden world.

And He wants His Church to be the kind of firstfruits, a people for His own special possession. Or as J.B. Phillips suggestively translates it, that we might be, so to speak, the first specimens of His new creation. And people should be able to see something of what the new heavens are going to be like and the new earth is going to be like by looking at you and by looking at me.

Because, you see, in that new earth yet to come, righteousness will be at home. And this kind of religion that James is speaking about is a religion that moves on from regeneration to righteousness. And beyond righteousness, or should we say through righteousness, it is an expression of religion pure and undefiled before God.

This is a marvelous passage of Scripture. Now, this reference to the regeneration of God's people marks the beginning of the passage then that is before us tonight. And I've already indicated the way we're going, so let's come to the second.

And this is the main point in the whole of the passage. We move then to the word of God and the promotion of righteousness, starting with verse 19 and going right through to verse 25. Now, let's divide this up.

The first thing I'd like you to notice is a plea for special attention. Now, James is writing with authority. He's writing under inspiration.

But he feels constrained to ask for special attention to something. My dear brothers, he says. My dear brothers, take note of this.

N.B. Take note. Listen, he says. I want you to get this.

Now, when we preachers say that, we may have one of many reasons for doing it. But I want you to hear James tonight. And just as sure as he said this to the first readers and wrote it to them and wanted them to listen, wanted to claim their attention, I believe that if he were here tonight, he would want to say exactly the same to us.

Listen, he says. I want you to get the point. My dear brothers, take note of this.

Well, James, what have you got? What's so important to hear? What do you want to get across? Well, he says. And here we're taken by somewhat of a surprise. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

Now, what's your reaction to that? I wonder if you are honest. What's your reaction to that? Do you feel that James is being a little bit trite here? Isn't there something more important to talk about than this? Just

telling us, really, we need to be careful how we listen, how we speak, and, well, what's your temper? Surely that's trivial. Surely that's trite.

Well, now, let's go on. Let's look at it. James first enunciates a universal rule.

My dear brothers, take note of this. Everyone says not only to the people sitting in the front rows, not only to those who like to sit in the back pews. We sometimes call them the backsliders, but that's not always true, is it? Everyone.

So there's no one left out here. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. The inspired writer deems this statement to be absolutely vital and of general application.

There is no one left out. Now, having enunciated a universal rule, now he goes on to expound that universal requirement. Regenerate men and women everywhere should individually take considerable care to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and watch their tempers.

Everyone should be quick to listen. Now, if you look at the context here, I think it will show quite clearly that James is primarily, if not exclusively, thinking of listening to the Word of God. Now, it doesn't do harm at all if you extend this generally, and we ought to listen a little better to one another.

Listen to what the other person has to say. If that other person is speaking to you, there's nothing worse than somebody who's looking the other way. Listen to one another.

But James very especially here is concerned with the fact that we should learn to listen quickly, astutely, and clearly. Listen with all our attention to the Word of God. Whether God may be listening to us in our times of trial, as we've trials that we were thinking about in the early verses, whether God is listening to us or not is beside the point for the moment.

There is one thing, says James, that we must on no account forget. We ought to be listening to God. Now, He will be listening to us, but we ought to be listening for His voice.

We simply must listen to His voice and His Word, and that makes demands upon the mode of our private reading of Scripture as well as of our listening to the Word preached by those whom God has endowed with some kind of ability and given them the call to do so. You see, godly people don't go to listen to any man preaching just because of who he is and what he is as a man. But the Word of God has to be listened to with all our hearts because it is the Word of God.

It doesn't matter who the preacher is. That's the point. And if you and I don't give all our attention to hear the Word of God when we read it ourselves and when we listen to it preached, I tell you, we are dishonoring the God of the Word.

You cannot fail. If you fail to be attentive to the Word of God, you are failing to be attentive to the God of the Word. You cannot honor the God of the Word when you come slovenly, sleepily, droopily, half-heartedly to listen to his Word or to read it for yourself.

Now, brethren, this is very hard. I would suggest that you and I need our best hours for our quiet times when we're wide awake. I don't know how many times during my Christian life I've had to change the hours of my private devotions for the simple reason that I find that certain times do not suit me.

I'm not wide awake, and I can't concentrate. And if I can't concentrate in meeting with God, then God help me everywhere else. Be quick to listen, says James.

See that all your powers are engaged, that you're wide awake. Everyone should be quick to listen. We need to train our ears and minds for the task and to be ready for each occasion when the Word of God is read and heard.

You see, by nature, we have a far greater tendency to want to discuss the Word than to listen to it. And I'm not going to enlarge upon that. But I'd like you to think about it.

We have an awful lot of interest in the matter of discussing the Word. But God says, first of all, listen to what I'm saying. And don't be too quick to discuss the Word and talk about it.

Listen to it. I believe, of course, that James is here simply re-echoing words of our Lord and sentiments often expressed by him in one way or another. For example, how many times did our Lord say, He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

What do you think he meant? Well, whatever else he meant, he meant this. Men and women, make sure you're hearing what is said. And you see, it is true of us that some of us, however we read the Word of God, we don't really hear very much.

And it could well be true of us that however often we come to the house of God and hear the Word of God proclaimed, we don't get very much. I hope that's not true, but I believe it must be true of some of us. Consider carefully how you listen, or in the old King James Version, take heed how you hear, says Jesus in Luke 8, 18.

How well do you listen to the Word of God? Are you a good listener? That's the first thing. The second thing, he says, is this. Everyone should be slow to speak.

Doesn't James put his finger on a raw spot somehow, doesn't he? We like to speak. I want you to know what I think. You want me to know what you think.

You know, it's not very important what I think or what you think. What is important is what God thinks. And that's why the most important thing of all is that I hear what he says and therefore know what he thinks.

A regenerate person is not meant to become a speaker or a preacher overnight. No, no. And none of us were meant to be as quick to speak as we are to listen.

As someone said long ago in the days of the apostolic fathers, I believe, whoever it was, God gave us only one tongue. He endowed us with two ears. Now, whether the implication of that is that we should listen twice as much as we speak, I don't know.

But certainly the scriptures would insist upon this, that we should learn well to listen and not to be too eager to speak. I don't know whether you heard this. I heard this in Ireland.

God said rather whimsically that people who listen by the inch and talk by the yard should be dismissed by the foot. Now, that's not a Christian sentiment, so you'll forget that, won't you? But purged of one little bit of extreme, it's not far away from the truth. Socrates had a student whom he was instructing in oratory.

And he had been instructing this student. Oh, this was the first time. They were due to be together for a whole morning.

The end of the second hour, Socrates said to him, called him by his name, and he said, I have to change the terms, he said, of our agreement. I have to charge you for teaching you two sciences at once. Pray, says the scholar, the student to him, for two sciences.

Well, says Socrates, I have to teach you first to listen before I can teach you to speak. And he says, you're a terrible listener, and it's going to take us a long time before I can come to the science of speech and oratory. Are you trained to listen? One of the most precious years of my life was a year I spent in North Wales, in the heart of the country, and where I had access to a farmhouse.

And we saw every member of that family come to the Lord over a period of a couple of weeks. Father, mother, children, servants, everybody that worked on the farm, including an old gypsy man that they gave a home to. And from the day that the father and mother were converted, they met at half past five every morning to read the word, and not to talk, but to listen.

Just to listen to the word. And they read over the scriptures maybe three, four, five times. Listening.

Are you surprised when I tell you that they became giants of the faith? That there hardly was a week, but that that homestead was a place of birth for sinners who came seeking the ways of Zion? Can you really listen to the word of God without wanting to say what you think about it? Just listen to it. Can you really hear the word of God without wanting to qualify it or modify it? I tell you, there's a streak of liberalism in every... No, no, no, we don't criticize the scriptures like some of the liberal theologians do, but we want to change what God is saying so clearly to us. Everyone should be slow to speak, and now let's hurry to this.

Everyone should be slow to become angry. It's easy for rebels, in process of being corrected by God, to become angry with his word. Oh, I've met them, and you have.

James knew that, so that he counsels us to watch our tongues, to abstain from giving expression to premature and unworthy thoughts. You see, you cannot be angry with the word of God without being angry with the God of the word again. I'm back there.

If this is the word of God, then when I'm cross with it, and when I argue with it, and when I put the weight of my mind against it, then I'm standing against God and his spirit. To argue with the word of God is to argue with the God of the word. And now James tells us the reason why he requires these three things.

He says, the reason for the necessity to control the temper and the tongue and to listen carefully is this. For man's anger, or this relates particularly to anger, man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. God regenerated us so that we should become his children.

And as his children become the first specimens of his new creation, to quote J.B. Phillips again, man's temper, whether it be aimed directly at God, or at God's people, or at any of his creatures, man's temper, whoever it is directed against, is never the means of achieving the end of our regeneration. The longer I live, the more certain I am that very, very, very few of us know anything about our holy righteous indignation. Oh, we say we do.

We'll excuse ourselves when we say, no, no, I didn't lose my temper. I wasn't really angry. It was righteous indignation.

And you can see the Pharisee coming right out, bursting out with a chest gun. My friend, your nature and mine is so polluted, and Satan is so subtle, you and I can very rarely manifest righteous indignation. Our tempers, says James, don't lend themselves to produce the righteousness that God requires of us.

Our tempers are always in the way. They're uncontrollable. He'll tell us that the tongue is uncontrollable later on.

He'll have a lot to say about that. But first of all, he's dealing with this. He says your temper should never be allowed to loose rein.

Hold it tight, he says, because it'll never work towards the end for which you were born again by the Word and the Spirit of God. It'll always hinder the production of righteousness. Isn't that true? A plea for special attention.

Now come on to verses 21 to 25. I'm hurrying through. A plea for universal and consistent application.

Divine truth requires obedience. See, if God has spoken, he ought to be obeyed. Now I can't say that is true of any man.

It is not true of the minister of this church. It is not true of anyone. None of us deserve to be obeyed, always.

But if God has spoken, God ought to be obeyed. Have we got that lesson? Frankly now, you talk to yourself for a moment. Have you come to this conclusion as far as your inner life is concerned? If God says a thing, then I ought to obey it.

Have you come there? Or is there an argument that goes on in your mind when you know that God says something, should I obey it or not, should I listen to it or should I just turn a deaf ear to it? Have you come to the point where you know and you believe that God having spoken ought to be obeyed? Now James calls for decisive action because God has spoken. In verses 21 and 22, James lends his considerable authority as the brother of our Lord, the presiding leader of the first general assembly of the Christian church in Jerusalem and the pillar of the church there. He is a great man, James.

He is a man of stature, James. He lends all his authority to this to make it imperative that those to whom he is writing should know this. They ought to obey the word of God and nothing short of obedience will please God.

Now, how are we going to obey? Well, James is very practical. Oh my, he's practical. First of all, he says there are certain things to renounce and to reject in all our lives.

So there's no one left out again, you see. This is a general statement. No one left out.

There are certain things to renounce and to reject. What are they? Therefore, says James in the first part of verse 21, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. That's the New International Version translation.

The evil that is so prevalent, that translation is clearer to the modern mind, I think, than the KJV filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness. I never used to know what that meant. I find difficulty with that, but I think I know what it means now.

But the other is certainly much clearer. There must be moral adjustments in the life of the truly regenerate. If you say that you have been born again and there is nothing to readjust in your life, friend, you need to question your experience.

I am very serious. I believe I represent the truth of the word of God. If you say that you have been born again and there is nothing to readjust, careful.

You may be dealing in words only. As sure as you are born of the Spirit of God, there is a vital readjustment to take place. And that appertains to every child of Adam, every creature in this world.

Now the imagery underlying the word get rid of is actually a very simple one. Pardon me referring to it, but I have to refer to it. It's so simple and yet when you get it, you kind of remember.

At least I do. It's the picture of simply taking your garments off. I'm not going to do that in the pulpit, but it's as simple as that.

Take your coat off, put it on one side. And the word is used, for example, of certain people who took their garments off at the stoning of Stephen in Acts chapter 7 and I think it's verse 58. And they laid their garments at the feet of one Saul of Tarsus.

They took their garments off and put them on one side. Of course they meant to reclaim their garments again and put them on again. James doesn't say that.

He says take them off. Now what are we to take off? What are we to renounce and thus to set aside? Well in the first place, we are to put on one side all moral filth. King James, all filthiness.

Are you holding on to filth? Can there be somebody in this well-dressed, sweet-looking congregation come to this lovely church tonight but you're holding on to moral filth under your lovely garments, in your nice, sweet faces. My, I'm saying it tonight, aren't I? I'll have some pats on the back tonight. But underneath it all, you're holding on to something that's morally dirty, contaminating.

And you're clinging to it. You say, I'll let anything go but this. And it's contaminating your imagination and your mind.

And it's turning your conscience topsy-turvy. And the whole of your inner life is upset by it, but you're clinging to it. Says James, get rid of it.

Just as you take a garment off, get rid of it. Put it back behind you and don't look at it. Now, the demand is comprehensive.

All moral filth, be it in the imagination, in the mind, or in the lifestyle, the external mode of behavior, it doesn't matter, wherever it is, wherever it is, get rid of it. Now, my dear people, we are largely believers here on a Sunday night. I know that.

Can I ask you in the name of my Lord, are you clinging to things that you should have got rid of long ago? Maybe in your business life, maybe in your personal life. Nobody else knows, but you know. Get rid of the stuff.

By the grace of God, put the thing on one side, whatever it is that the spirit condemns you about. Have no truck with it, because God says so, and God is to be obeyed. Now, if your God is just a plaything, well, all

right, you haven't got the God of the Bible, don't claim that.

Just say you're playing at being religious, okay. Carry on, you'll wake up one day and you'll find that you've just been playing games. But if you're dealing with a God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when He says something, obey Him.

He speaks to be obeyed. Interestingly enough, there is one other possible understanding of that word. There's a word, ruparion, the Greek word for all filthiness, filthiness.

And the other possible understanding of it is that it comes from a root, rupos, which when used in medical terms refers to wax in the ear. Now, many of you may have had that from time, one time or another, and you got a little bit deaf. And I've met people in this congregation say, I couldn't hear you as well this morning.

And sometimes it's the PA system, sometimes it's our voice that's not very good and we don't get across. But you know, sometimes there's something wrong with the hearing. And some of the good people who say they can't hear find it very difficult to believe that maybe they have wax in the ear.

But you see, there's a subtle point here. What James is saying is this, that immorality in the life disables a man from hearing the voice of God, makes you deaf. So if there are men and women, boys and girls here tonight who say, I rarely hear the voice of God clearly.

I really, I really, rarely hear the voice of God clearly from his word. And I can listen to all your sermons and frankly, I don't hear very much more than your voice. I tell you, see to your hearing.

There may be fault with us as preachers. And I have regularly to examine myself and I know my dear brother Donald MacLeod does likewise. But I want to ask you very seriously, if you've got wax in the ear, spiritual ear I'm talking about.

In other words, if there is something morally wrong in your life so that you can come and go to the house of the holy, hear the word of God read and read it yourself and study it yourself and know the doctrine, but you never hear the speaker, the divine voice is still. It's all a theory. It's all a subject.

It's not a person to person relationship. It's learning the subject. It's learning theology.

It's reading the Bible. God have mercy upon us. He's not real.

We don't hear his voice. There are things to renounce and there are things to reject. Then also we must renounce or put away on one side the evil that is prevalent.

As the NIV puts it or as the King James puts it, we've referred to it already, this superfluity of naughtiness. Now, there may be one or two thoughts here. The superfluity, the word superfluity means the spillover.

And James may very well be referring to the kind of things in the old life you've got rid of an awful lot, but there are so many things that remain that you thought could be spared. Some things, some practices, some ideas, some notions, some attitudes from the old life of sin and you want to hold on to them. You've got rid of so much, but there are these things you want to hold on to them.

But fundamentally it would seem James wants to stress something else, maybe alongside of that, and that is the thought that all this is a kind of tangled undergrowth. Don't ask me to go into details now.

Grammatically, I don't want to do that and take time.

But there is the picture here of a kind of tangled undergrowth. Sometimes you have it on a farm where the hay is growing and the weather is not too good and you can't cut it. And you have a second crop of hay growing under cover of the first crop.

Now, sometimes in our lives when we've got rid of the things that are visible, there are still very many things that belong to an undergrowth that we're still cultivating. And it's all evil. And James, as the servant of God, wants us to get rid not simply of the things that are evident and visible, but of the undergrowth of immorality in thought, in mind, in spirit, in any sense whatsoever.

Something to reject. There is something to receive as well as to reject. Now come on to verse 22.

Second part of verse 21 and verse 22. Now, says James, having done that, then humbly accept the word planted in you, or the implanted or the engrafted word. Probably it's better to translate it as the NIV does, the word planted in you.

Which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Now remember, James is speaking to a people who've been born again. Okay? He's speaking to a people who concerning whom he said a little while ago, of his own will he begat us by the word of truth. So the word of God, by the action of God has already brought us to new life and therefore the word of God is in our hearts in some sense.

But James says that there is a fuller sense still in which we must receive the implanted word. Now, what is that fuller sense? Well, you notice he's already stressed that we must be careful how we listen to the word of God. And he says that we must be quick to listen.

We must be careful to listen so that we really hear what God is saying. Here he tells us that even if we hear the word of God properly, that in and of itself is inadequate. Let's pause there for a moment.

He's been stressing that we should listen carefully to the word of God so that we hear it. Now he's telling us that it isn't enough simply to hear what God is saying. We must receive it in our sense over and above that.

What's he talking about? Having heard the word of God, we must obey it. Simply to hear it and agree that it is the word of God and therefore too may be simply self-deception. Now let me put it like this.

You see, you and I can read this word of James or any part of the gospel and we may say to ourselves, that's the word of God. I agree with that. I think that ought to be applied everywhere, universally.

I'd like to preach this to so-and-so and I'd like to tell so-and-so about this and everybody should hear this. This is the word of God. Listen, my friend, that can be sheer self-deception.

It makes you think that you're right. But you haven't done anything yet, says James, until you obey it. Okay? Accepting that it is the word of God is only a step towards the desired end.

Acknowledging that it is the truth of God is only a step towards what God is after. What he's after is this. Hearing to what he's saying, listening to what he's saying, hearing what he's saying, then after that, doing it, doing it, doing it.

There is so much to say about this. You see, simply to agree with God is not pure religion and undefiled. And sometimes we can get into a quandary here because we agree with what God is saying.

We think we've got everywhere. My friend, we haven't. We've got to do it.

And it's in the doing of it that the man is blessed, says James. The word of God already embraced by the mind then and implanted in the heart needs a still further reception by all of us. Namely, the kind of reception we can only give it as and when we are ruled by it and not simply amused by it or even educated by it.

It is not unlike the kind of reception required by a patient when visiting a physician. Now, I hope none of us have to do this this coming week. But you know what happens.

We're in our well. We have to go to the doctor. We tell him about how we feel and he will diagnose.

You say, this is what's the matter with you. And then he may give us a prognosis and say, well if you don't have it dealt with, if you don't have it dealt with, well, this is going to happen to you. And then if he's a good doctor, he will say, well, but I can deal with it.

And he'll either prescribe pills or medicine or whatever or he may tell you, well, you need surgery. But you see, the whole thing hasn't started yet. You may say to the doctor, OK, doctor, thank you very much.

I believe that you've diagnosed my situation. It's exactly as you say. The symptoms are just what you say and I feel exactly as you put it.

I believe you're right. And I believe that what you've said I ought to do, I ought to do and that'll put me right, whether it's surgery or pills or pillows or what. I believe you.

You know, you haven't started yet. The whole process of healing starts when I take the first pill with a view to continuing to take the whole course. Or when I go into hospital and allow the knife, the lancet.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we are walking on thin ice, you see. And we can play with this holy religion and we can say, I agree with everything God says. Good.

But you haven't started yet. Obey it. That's what James is saying.

There is an obedience, I'm sorry, there is an acceptance of the word of God which is purely intellectual. And you know when a man is off beat or off beam theologically, you can smell him a thousand miles away. You haven't started doing what God has said you ought to do.

And James says because of that you haven't started living. James demands decisive action and I have to close with this. My word, I'm sorry.

James proceeds with a very telling illustration. I'll just sum it up. Let me read to you verses 22 to 25.

Do not merely listen to the word, he says, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 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.

And after looking at himself he goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 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. Simply to hear the word of God and not obey it as it

relates to us personally is just like looking at oneself in a mirror long enough to see a smudge in the face, see your hair disheveled or your coat disheveled or something like that and you just have a squint in the mirror and suddenly run away and you forget all about it and you carry the smudge with you all day.

Now he says there is a reading of the word of God which is like that. It only takes enough time for you to see, oh, I may have a little bit of a smudge in my face but you forget about it. The word of God doesn't convince you, doesn't convict you.

You go away before it has had time to deal with you. But now there is another kind of listening, says James. It's not just peeping into the word just like that, as you peep into the mirror and an impression is made that you can soon forget, but you peer into it, you gaze into it, and you go on gazing until you see exactly what's the smudge on your face.

And you see if you do that in the word of God, sooner or later you will discover how to get rid of that smudge and what you ought to do to get rid of it and how God will enable you to do what is necessary. And thus the righteousness that God requires of his regenerate people will be produced by men and women not only hearing God's voice and listening to it, but listening to it long enough and reading his word long enough that the impression made is by the Spirit of God and men cannot other than obey. There is another subtle point here, dare I put it like that.

See the word of God into which we Christians are to look and peer as in a mirror, says James, is the law of liberty. Now you never come across that phrase elsewhere, I don't think. From one point of view, the law puts us in prison, condemns us.

Paul speaks about that. There is no salvation by the law. James is speaking of the gospel as a kind of law, but this is a different kind of law.

You may ask, how can you speak of the gospel as a law? Well, because along with the gospel there is the ethic. And when Jesus says, if you love me, keep my commandments, he is thundering as loud as any of the thunders of Sinai that obedience to him is necessary. If Jesus is Lord, his law stands.

Now James is speaking of the gospel as a kind of law, not like the law of Moses, but it is nevertheless something that makes real demands upon us. Jesus is Lord as well as Savior. Now he says, this law, different from the law of Moses, is the law of liberty.

It doesn't put you in prison and condemn you and leave you there and is unable to get you out again and to liberate you, but the more you look into this law, the more sure you will ultimately find liberty. Freedom from sin. Freedom from self.

Freedom from Satan. Freedom from the tyranny of circumstances. Freedom.

If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed. So you see, the tragedy with so many of us is this, that our reading of the word of God is superficial and we just see the little smudge on our face when we go along. Ah, it isn't too bad.

We don't read on to see everything that it has to say to us, and we don't read on to see that the smudge that has been discovered can be dealt with by the grace of the God of the book, the word of God and our regeneration, the word of God and the promotion of righteousness, and it is in this way, Sister James, that we come to the point where, by the grace of the same God, we can cultivate a religion that is pure. Well, I'll

only mention this as I close. There are two things about it.

It is a religion that shares in the compassion of God himself. Have you noticed how in the Old Testament, especially in the book of Deuteronomy, but in many other places, God is so concerned about the poor and the widow and the orphan, and the righteousness that God produces in his people is a righteousness which is not hard and iron-like, but it's righteousness with a heart like his. But it's not only righteousness.

It's not only compassion. On the other side, says James, you are not only producing morality when you are cultivating this kind of religion, but you are also cultivating sanctity. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and the widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

In other words, it is to be holy before God. It is to keep oneself untamed by the grace of God, by the word of God, by the spirit of God, by the indwelling of God, and by the rule of God, by the means that he supplies, and our obedience thereto, and our faith in him, and our relationship to him as his children, this is the way for the promotion of religion that is pure before God. Not before men, pure before God.

Brothers and sisters, I don't know how you feel when you come to the end of a passage like this, but I know how I feel. I found it very difficult to face this squarely, to bring it to you good people tonight, because it gets under the skin, doesn't it? But it really does come down to this, that if you and I are not doers of the word, then we're nothing. We're deceiving ourselves.

And the plea of James is this, don't be self-deceptive. And the more you agree with the Bible without doing it, the more you deceive yourself. Now this is the challenge to me.

Now I'll leave it with you. The more I say to the word of God, yes, I agree with it, yes, I believe it is the word of God, and if any liberal were to come to me and say, well, that's not the part of the word of God, well, I would fight and I would say, you're wrong, and I would enter into an argument, and I'd be prepared to take a stand on it. But you see, I haven't started yet.

Can I do it? Are we doers of the word? Oh, brothers and sisters, I covet your prayers for one another and for me, and our prayers for each other, that we shall become increasingly known as doers of the word, so that men may indeed know something of the new Jerusalem, what it's going to be like, and the new heavens and the new earth, wherein righteousness dwells, by looking at us, by listening to us, by watching us. And all, let us close with this, of the one and only truth. Our Heavenly Father, we crave your mercy upon us as we conclude our service tonight.

We are unprofitable servants. Our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. We are so given to things that are superficial, even in relation to your word and to yourself.

Oh, Spirit of God, win our hearts afresh. Master our minds and our wills, and mold us after your image, that we may become what we say we are. What by your grace you have made it possible for all your regenerate to be, by giving us all things that pertain to life and godliness, in the knowledge of your dear Son.

Forgive our sins and follow us with your presence as we leave and separate tonight, and help us on our pilgrim way to grow. For Jesus' sake, amen.

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