



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

Rogation Sunday, April 27th, 2008

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

"If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain." James 1:26

According to the words of our epistle, not all religion is acceptable to God. Such sentiments are a great shock to those folk whose only criterion for measuring the value of a religion is that somebody believes it. But God speaking here in this text says that a certain man's religion is invalid, in fact it is worth nothing at all.

James is writing here to people who have come into the Christian orbit. They had picked up some Christian attitudes about the great prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, and so they were coming to services on the Lord's Day for teaching and breaking bread. They were singing hymns and praying to God in the name of Jesus. In other words they were just like us, thinking they were religious people. We don't spend Sundays at the bar or watching television but we are in church because we consider ourselves to be religious. Yet there was something deeply flawed about the religion of some of those people, and they

had fallen victim to self-deception. The question facing us is, are we just like them.

Then, what is true religion? Are you interested? Well, James tells us that it consists of three indispensable ingredients.

1) **Keeping your tongue in check.** True religion is keeping a tight rein on your tongue, says James. It is much more than that, but without that there is no true Christianity. In other words, unless your religion shows itself in your language it is a counterfeit religion. The tongue is an outward visible indicator of our inward spiritual state. When you read the letter of James you see this theme of guarding the tongue

running right through it. We read last week where James mentioned being slow to speak and being slow to anger (v.19). But then he returns to this theme at

length in chapter three for twelve verses, and in the fourth chapter the danger of wild words is the basic theme, and in chapter five he mentions grumbling (v.9) and swearing (v.12). So for James our words are crucial indicators of whether our religion is genuine or not. Who is controlling our tongues? Is it the Lord Jesus?

But you realize that James is arguing for a much bigger principle when he selects the example of the unbridled tongue. The basic principle at stake is self-control. That is how real genuine religion shows itself. James knows that it is crucial to bring our emotions and our affections under the word of God, and so he seizes on something alive and vivid to arouse our consciences - our words. The barometer of our self-control is how we are guarding and controlling our tongues. "Put a bridle on your tongue," he is saying, or "Keep a tight rein on your tongue. James is talking about checking and restraining our language. Our overconfident, boasting, lying, gossiping, sassy, backbiting, complaining tongues run out of control and can do the damage of a runaway horse. James is saying, "Remember self-control! Keep a tight rein on your tongue."

2) **Get your hands dirty.** Loving our neighbor as ourselves is the second great commandment, and here it is the consequent indispensable ingredient of true religion. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (v.27).

What is James doing here? He is not giving us a comprehensive definition of religion but he is making

this very important point, that religion without getting your hands dirty is worthless Christianity. James is speaking of the helpless people which God in his providence brings into our lives. In his day who would look after the aged frail senile widow? Who would keep and raise unwanted children? True religion, James is saying, shows itself in looking after that neighbor of yours who is in need. We can expand the list of needy people. The neighbor we meet may be the sufferer with AIDS, the mentally handicapped, the elderly, the totally deaf, the drug addict, the homeless, the street children, the flood and famine victims, and the refugees.

Notice the biblical order here in James, that it is very personal, so that first a man must learn self-control - he keeps a tight rein on himself, and then consequently he is in a fit state to look out to the people around him and ask, "What can I do for these?" It has to be in that order. A man who hasn't learned self control would be dynamite to put among orphans or widows.

What is true religion, accepted as pure and faultless by God our Father? To look after orphans and widows in their distress; to love your orphaned neighbor as your non-orphaned self, to love your widowed neighbor as your non-widowed self, to give your time and your energy and your money for them. Who is going to bother with needy people, those who know that God bothered about them. This is our sacrifice to God. How can I show the Lord how much I love him for giving himself for me? If he were here on earth I could wait on him, but he is not on earth but his people are and when you do those same things to the least of his people you are doing that to him. It's your doxology to him to look after orphans and widows in their distress. It all stems from the cross of Christ. Because the Lord Jesus kept back nothing from us we keep back nothing in his service. "Love so amazing so divine demands my soul, my life, my all."

3) Keep Your Life Clean. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: ... to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." The saintly Robert Murray McCheyne, died while he was still in his 20's but many became true Christians through his influence. He said, "Above all things cultivate your own spirit. Your own soul is your first and greatest care. Seek advance in personal holiness. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. One word spoken by you when your conscience is clear and your heart is full of

God's Spirit, is worth 10,000 words spoken in unbelief and sin."

So here is a dilemma. True religion consists of us doing such things as looking after orphans who've been abandoned, and senile grannies dumped by their families. No one can do that without getting very involved in the lives of others, their legal rights, and their social and economic welfare. We are to keep ourselves unspotted from the world, and yet very involved in our world. That is the Christian dilemma. In the world, but not of it. That defines it. So unpolluted involvement on this earth is our vocation. I guess that that is the most difficult thing to do. Don't give up. Be aware of the dilemma, and ask the Savior to help you. He will be touched with the feeling of your infirmity because he has been tempted in every point as you are.

There is always a way to stay pure. Think of the days when the snow melts and there is nothing but slush and water and mud everywhere. Walk on the pavement. Keep away from the gutter: Steer clear of the puddles; watch out for the cars and trucks as they come near those pools of water; you know that there is going to be spray and mud. Keep yourself. So too in the world, there is a way of Christ-likeness and walking in step with the Spirit so that we keep pure. There are all the daily pressures to grow stale. Keep on the narrow way. There are the little things that can make us dirty. There is the ceaseless bombardment of our eyes, ears, thoughts and imaginations. Keep on the narrow way. Our values are under attack; our standards are threatened. Keep on the narrow way. Never mock holy things. Always admire purity, innocence, gentleness and modesty. Never think it is sophisticated to use some bad language, to drink just a little too much, to get a little way-out in your clothes, to have to see every adult movie that everyone is talking about. Know that God expects you if you are a truly religious man to keep yourself from being polluted by the world.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.