

Text: James 1:26-27a

My purpose for this message: To help Christians understand that true Christians not only believe things that are true, but do things that are right: control tongue, care for the needy.

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## True Religion (1)

PRAY.

Has anyone read *Elmer Gantry*, or seen the movie? The Sinclair Lewis novel about a phony evangelist. In college Gantry was studying to be a lawyer but discovered that he liked being the center of attention and the best way he could be that was as a preacher. Which could have been a problem because of his two loves: women and alcohol.

Gantry goes to a Baptist seminary but fails to graduate because of a drunken spree, and because he seduced a young woman. So for a time, he turns his considerable verbal skills to selling farm implements. He could make money but couldn't get the adulation that craved. So he takes up with a woman evangelist, becoming her manager and lover. When she's killed, he takes her place at the pulpit. The rest of Gantry's life is a pathetic screen play of womanizing, manipulating the church for his own purposes, and eventually become a famous preacher who can't keep his eyes off the women in the choir.

It's a bitter book to read if you're a Christian because each page oozes with cynicism. "They're all frauds; there's no such thing as true religion. People just use it for their own purposes."

When a person becomes a Christian," people start to scrutinize what the new convert says and does. Because even the uninitiated knows that either proves or disproves the person's claim. Does he have the real disease or not? Is she a cubic zirconium, or a diamond? We are saved solely by repentance and faith and there's nothing we can do to add to that. But it is what we do and don't do *after* conversion that proves or disproves our profession. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer used to say, *Only those who obey, believe*. Which is James' argument in today's text. READ Jas.1:26-27.

This isn't an exhaustive list of everything a Christian should or shouldn't do. These are 3 samples of authentic Christian obedience; things that help verify—or defy—our profession of faith. Caution: Neither James, or Peter, or Paul, or *any* of the NT writers pretend that a Christian will obey Christ perfectly in *any* area of discipleship. On the other hand, if we willingly ignore God's commands, are marked more by consistent disobedience than consistent *obedience*, we should get as concerned about our religion as others will be.

At the last minute I decided to keep the 3<sup>rd</sup> example 'til next week because it was too much to try and do in 1 sermon.

### 1. Example: Restrain Your Tongue

We're not going to spend much time on this because there's an extended message coming on this in chapter 3. But, James warns people who are confident that we're pretty good samples of a good Christian—"Ahh, what about your tongue?" If you heard me tell a dirty joke out in the lobby after service, what would you think? Or tell what you *knew* was a lie, what would you think? Or use profanity, or some racial slur, or talk badly about someone who wasn't there? You *know* what you'd think.

If we claim to be Christians but our tongues don't reflect it, people draw conclusions; *that's* not true religion.

<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.* A pattern of lies, slander, swearing, vulgar language or jokes, bigotry, yelling in anger, fits of rage, and gossip all raise serious questions in the minds of others, and should *especially* in our minds too. More about this in future months. Next example.

## 2. Help the needy

REREAD v.27a. "Widows and orphans" is shorthand for the neediest people. Remember, probably everyone who first read this letter, was not only a Christian, but Jewish. Jewish widows were looked after by a male relative who served as her protector and provider. But what if there was no male relative...? These women were often neglected—or worse, exploited. Without a male provider, they were usually poor, and without a male protector, mistreated in the courts and on the streets. READ Is.10:1-2.

The plight of an orphan (had a mother but no father) was just as dire. If he was old enough he could work and help his mother but if not, then he had to get by on what his mother could forage, gleaned from the edges of harvested fields, or what she got by begging. Poor as his mother, the orphan was just as vulnerable to the ruthless. READ Job 24:3, 9.

Among these early Christians, widows and orphans were the main needy people. And God expected *His* people, to care for them. READ Deut.14:28-29; 24:17-22.

Who are the needy among us, and what does God expect us to do for them?

In 1933, Franklin Roosevelt became president of the United States. It was an awful time to become president. The country was in economic shambles. Fortunes had been lost in the market crash of 1929-30, but it was regular folks who had little before, who had nothing now. Men—sometimes entire families roamed the land desperately searching for work, for food, for anything. Roosevelt closed the banks and frantically enacted one piece of legislation after another trying to breathe life into the American economy and provide work. His programs were lumped together as the "New Deal" and was the genesis of the Social Security system, and the foundation of the modern welfare state.

And while it rescued the nation from disaster, it had an unintended effect: it dealt a blow to the church's historic and biblical concern for the needy. Well, not the liberal churches, but over time more and more of those who held to the gospel turned God's call to care for the needy, over to the government. *They'll* take care of the widows, orphans, elderly, the prisoner, the unemployed, the diseased, or the working poor, or... There's Aid to Dependent Children, food stamps, Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, the office of the aging, SSI, etc.

We even count on the government to care for our own, fellow believers. Should this be so?

Well, while I am not quite convinced that we should tell other believers not to collect money from the government, or send any we get back, I worry that now we simply assume the government's going to take care of *all* the needy people, do so *adequately* and so we need concern ourselves with these folks, no more.

Because God's call to care for the needy remains on the church. No matter what the government does. OK, so we can't turn back the clock and undo the system, but there are still needy people out there, people who need money—and more. Will we open our wallets, open our homes, open our arms, open our daytimers, open our

hearts to someone in need. It should be love that drives our help; *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind*; **and**, *love your neighbor as yourself*. Luke 10:27

Not a love that simply says, “Good luck buddy. I love you.” 1 Jn.3:18: *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

- Giving money: maybe individually to someone; maybe supporting ministries or aid agencies like Water Street Rescue Mission or Clare House, Bridge of Hope, Habitat for Humanity, or Pregnancy Resource Centers, or Hospice. We don’t need to exclusively give our money to Christian ministries. God uses others too.
- Giving time: Maybe as little as carving out an hour or two to prepare and take a meal to someone recovering from surgery, or having a baby. Volunteering to help Gratz do some exercises, or simply visiting him occasionally to talk to him, and even though eh can’t talk back, loving him enough to make the effort anyway. Volunteer at a nursing home; or as Ed and Joel Bare are doing, at the prison, or as Amos Stoltzfus does, at a hospital.
- Giving your home: Maybe a troubled child needs a home for a while. Some of you have taken in foster children. You folks are my heroes. I know how disruptive that must be. Some of you have taken in a relative for some time, or brought your aging parents to live with you.
- Giving up our rights: this is the bottom line isn’t it? Do I have the right to fill up my daytimer with things I want to do, or has God called me to let room for Him? Do I have the right to budget each dollar I earn to buy and spend on the things I’d like, or has God called me to let discretionary room for some giveaways? Do I have the right to consider my home my castle, or is it God’s house?

James will ask in chapter 2, “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, *“Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?*” What good is it? Is it true or false religion?

### Concl:

Our first responsibility to the needy people are within our faith family.

*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.* Gal.6:10.

But if there may be others God’s calling us to serve in his name, who may not yet *be* in the family. Someone has said we should pray for the needy as we do about the lost: “Lord, today bring across my path someone whose need I can meet. I budget money from every paycheck solely for the purpose of giving away. You could do that. Or make a monthly contribution to House of His Creation. How about calling Water Street Mission and ask how your entire family could volunteer there? Tell Jere Skiles you’ll go to Mississippi with him to help rebuild. Adopt a child like the Farrars, Peiffers, Hueninks, Lapps and others of you. I got a call last night, “Do you know of anyone in your congregation looking to adopt a newborn boy?” Take in Foster children like the Elys and Rodgers. Take in your aging parents like the McElraths and Groffs have. Volunteer at your schools like a lot of people here have. Call the Salvation Army, House of His Creation, or other work and see how they could use

you. If nothing they offer is a good fit for you, no problem. Politely thank them, but no thanks, then look elsewhere. Be trained to counsel expectant mothers at a pregnancy center like John Esh and others have.

James 2:19: You believe in one God; you've got all doctrine about the trinity and Jesus' atonement right; big deal. Even *demons* believe the right things. What do your *actions* claim about your faith?