

The End of Religion

James 1: 17-27 *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

“Imagine there’s...no religion, too.” --John Lennon

Paul Tillich somewhere wrote that Jesus is the end of religion. In Jesus we see that religion is for the purpose of helping us live as true human beings, as God made us to live. By religion, I mean systems of belief, worship, doctrine, and traditions. Getting caught in religion for its own sake can lead to unhealthiness—spiritual, emotional, and societal. Religious extremism today shows us how sick religion can get, whether it is Islam, Judaism, Christianity, or whatever. Jesus’ radical emphasis on how we live, not what we believe, shows us that religion is not an end in itself.

The writer of the Letter of James would agree. It was written toward the end of the first century to Christian communities suffering persecution. The writer was saying basically this: Look, the situation is very bad, I know. But the day of Christ’s return is not far off. Hang in there. Don’t compromise who you are. Be faithful to the message of the Gospel that you have received. For us today, the message might be: There is much going on around you that is a complete mess, a self-centered, power-seeking culture that is destroying people, the creation, and itself. Stay grounded in who you are called to be. You may not be able to change the whole situation, but you can be who you are, keep doing what you know is right and true. That is how you contribute to what God is doing to bring healing, peace, and wholeness, by living what you have heard and learned in Jesus. That's the "implanted word" James speaks of.

James writes that every act of generosity, every perfect gift comes down from God, the Father of lights, the Creator. God is consistently good and giving. God who made us has re-birthed us through the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. We are like the first fruits of a great harvest, new life for the world. James is saying to the desperate Christian communities that though the situation around them is full of suffering and hopelessness, they can trust that God is good, that everything God gives us and the world is good. The one who called the world into being can be trusted to keep upholding and renewing the world. James wants to instill firmly in our hearts and minds the essential and unchangeable goodness of God, in spite of everything around us that is difficult, painful, and a challenge to our faith.

James doesn’t try to explain evil or suffering. His approach is simple and direct: God is the source of goodness and generous giving. We are made in God’s image so that we can live generously, giving life. If we are doing

that, then we are the “first fruits” of God’s new creation. We are making our lives offerings to God and to life.

For James, our life in Christ calls us to live in ways opposite to the realities around us—violence, greed, evil, and suffering. His question is not: Why is there evil and suffering in the world? Or, Why do people act so badly? His question is: What are you doing with your own lives? That there is anger in the world doesn’t mean you have to live out of your anger. That there is violence or greed or hate in the world doesn’t mean that they have to take root in you. You are called to be different in the world. You are part of what God is doing for the world, instruments of God’s goodness and generosity, God’s giving of life.

James then says that we are to be quick to listen, slow to talk, and slow to let our anger build up. Our anger does not accomplish anything in God’s purposes. We are to get rid of the things in ourselves that we condemn and despise around us, in other people. And we are to embrace humbly the word of life, the Gospel that God has implanted in us.

James turns quickly from theology—God’s goodness and unchangeableness—to practicalities, how we are to live. First, listen. Stop talking so much. Jesus would often begin a parable by saying, Listen! After teaching, he would say, Let those who have ears listen! Jesus is not interested in experts telling others what is right, what they should believe, or showing off how much they know. Jesus is interested in people whose hearts and minds are open and teachable. And the only way for that to happen is if we learn to be quiet and listen, with our ears and the ears of our hearts.

That is why silence is so important. We talk in our community about the importance of practicing silence. Perhaps we talk more about it than practice it! It is hard to stop the compulsion of talking and be quiet long enough to listen. Silence and listening are essential in order to discern the movements of God’s spirit in and around us. Being persons and a community grounded in silence is the most radical thing we can be. It means we are not listening to the confusion of the world around us for direction and meaning; we listen to God alone.

Anger. When we are hurt, we get angry. When we see injustice, we get angry. When someone doesn’t give us what we want or do what we expect, we get angry. James will say more about anger later in his letter. But for now, he is saying that anger, though a real human emotion, accomplishes nothing for God’s purposes, even so-called “righteous anger.” Anger only feeds anger and escalates toward violence. If we are listening, seeking deeper understanding, this helps us be “slow to anger,” as James puts it. If we are listening to and understanding what it is that makes us angry, then our anger has little to feed on. Understanding and compassion, for ourselves and others, cuts the supply line to anger, and makes way for insight and positive action that brings something life-giving into the situation.

James reminds his readers that they are like gardens in which God has planted the word of the Gospel, the good news of God’s saving, restoring love embodied in Jesus. They are to trust that implanted word, letting it live at the

center of their contemplation and their lives. It is the source of their own salvation, or wholeness. This helps us rid ourselves of what James calls “sordidness and rank growth of wickedness.” It is a matter of working with deeper insight and understanding into our own hearts, facing and embracing those things in us that are garbage. Trying to drive out all the stuff we don’t like or beat ourselves up about it never works and only makes the situation worse. What we try to drive away or suppress ends up getting larger. That is why moralistic religion doesn’t work. It only fills us with guilt and distrust of ourselves.

We all have in us seeds of goodness and life, and seeds of destructiveness and suffering. When we try to throw out the “bad” seeds, we only increase their growth. So we learn to water the “good” seeds instead. Then we find that over time, the other seeds simply wither away, become less potent. But our watering must be consistent and mindful, not haphazard and half-hearted. If I have come to understand that I have a strong penchant for being critical and condemning of others—which, in fact, I have—then I have to work with that every day, be aware of it, understand how and when it arises, and not feed it! Then I give my fuller attention to being gracious, accepting, and taking my hands off of other people! I am converting my garbage into flowers!

James sums up: Be doers of the word, not just those who hear it. Listen to the word of life. Then do what you hear. Put it into practice. For James it is all about practice. Practice means putting our faith into our lives, living out what we say we believe and who we are. It is practice in the sense of what we do when we learn to play an instrument or to paint. We keep trying and working at it until it becomes part of us. I don’t know a serious person of faith who hasn’t said on many occasions: It is so hard to be forgiving! It is so hard to love! It is so hard to move beyond my comfort zone to be with people who are different! It is so hard to love others and myself! But we keep at it. I’ve also not known a person who, having taken seriously this practice of faith, has not experienced over time significant progress and growth. It is a matter of practice.

For James, and also Jesus, we are not hopelessly messed up sinners who can’t do anything good. We are not “original sinners” but “original doers of good.” It’s just that for whatever reasons—which we call sin—we’ve gotten out of practice, been thrown off track, lost our memory of who we really are and who God made us to be. Because of human confusion and influences, not God’s design, we end up acting very badly—justifying poverty and war and self-centeredness. For James, we get back on track by trusting the word of the Gospel that God has planted in us, and putting it into practice.

Jesus is the end of religion because he revealed the dangers of being religious instead of letting religion point us toward living as true human beings. There is a Zen Buddhist teaching that says don’t mistake the finger pointing to the moon for the moon itself. Don’t mistake religion for the life it points us to. Today religion has become very unhealthy and violent. Those who take

religion as an end in itself hold fast to their religion as true and right, condemning others. Religion has gotten lost in religion.

James is saying that the end of religion is not religion, but compassionate and just living. True, pure religion, he writes, consists of two things. First, “caring for orphans and widows,” which is a New Testament phrase that stands for all who are most vulnerable. The test of true religion is whether its adherents are living compassionately, seeking to meet the needs of human beings. The second thing is keeping ourselves “unstained by the world.” That may sound kind of old fashioned, like those radical religious sects that withdraw from the world. That’s not what James means. James means that we are to pay primary attention to our spiritual lives and health. We are to recognize that there are some attitudes and movements in our society and world that are poisonous for us, that are “toxic” to the kind of life to which we are called and for which we are created. We can draw a firm line between our own inner life and the things that are demeaning and destructive to persons and to life. It doesn’t mean we withdraw from the world. It means that we become so spiritually grounded that we cannot be overtaken by what is contrary to what we see, learn, and know in Jesus.

All of what James has said shows us the priority of a consistent and vital spiritual life, what we call the inward journey. Silence. Listening. Less talking about and more living out what we believe. Trusting the word of God’s love in Christ that is planted in us. The inward journey cultivates in us the kind of listening silence that leads us into practice, the outward journey. Jesus shows us that the true end, or fulfillment, of religion is the way we live our lives. For James it is simply listening and doing.