

Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9  
James 1:17-27

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
September 2, 2018

## **True Religion**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our psalm today is called a “royal psalm,” for the subject is the king in Jerusalem, from the Davidic dynasty. At the occasion of his royal wedding we hear praise of the king—the divinely appointed promoter of justice and the opponent of evil. Listen to these words from Psalm 45:1-2 and 6-9...

### *Introduction to the Epistle Lesson*

Our Epistle Lesson this morning is taken from the letter of James, the brother of Jesus. Here the primary interest is in clarifying what the gospel means for Christian living. To that end an array of topics are covered. Listen to these words from James 1:17-27...

### *Sermon*

Those last two verses of our Epistle Lesson are the basis for today’s sermon and bear repeating:

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.

For James, true worship does not rely upon elaborate vestments, marvelous music, or noble sermons. Rather, it lies in the practical service of humankind and in the purity of one’s own personal life. For it’s possible for the church to be so taken up with the beauty of its buildings and the splendor of its liturgy, that it forgets about Christian service. For James, the most beautiful service of worship can never take the place of Christian charity.

In our text we find three characteristics of a person whose religion is pure and undefiled. First, he refuses self-deception and bridles his tongue. That is to say, he keeps a tight rein on what comes out of his mouth, like a bridle controlling a horse. For James knows what great damage the tongue is capable of. From childhood we have heard the little rhyme, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Thus is the child victim of name calling persuaded to ignore such taunts, to refrain from retaliation, and to remain calm. However, the truth is that we have all been hurt by words that were hurled against us. Words like “Stupid.” “Ugly.” “Fatso.” “Shorty.” “Nerd.” Or phrases like, “You’ll never amount to anything.” “Can’t you ever do anything right?” “How could anyone ever love you?” Someone said that carelessly spoken words have the ability to pierce more sharply than a sword.

Proverbs says:

Rash words are like sword thrusts,  
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (12:18)

Among the foundational principles of Israel, in covenant with God, was the instruction to refrain from slander and false witness against a neighbor. Here James picks up the charge and proclaims its relevance to the new Israel—the church of Jesus Christ. “Control your speech.”

The first two verses of Proverbs 15 declare:

A soft answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger.  
The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge,  
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.

For our religion to be true, we must avoid self-deception and bridle our tongues.

Secondly, James says that characteristic of one whose religion is pure and undefiled is the mercy and love he shows to the oppressed. Widows and orphans were often named as examples by virtue of their particularly helpless state. They were generally the neediest people in the early

church. There was no life insurance or Social Security programs to support them. Jobs for them were scarce. And unless a family member was willing to care for them, they were reduced to begging.

We hear this same word in the Old Testament book of Isaiah:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
 remove the evil of your doings  
 from before my eyes;  
 cease to do evil,  
 learn to do good;  
 seek justice,  
 rescue the oppressed,  
 defend the orphan,  
 plead for the widow. (1:16-17)

In our Psalm this morning we heard this of the king of Israel:

Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever.  
 Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity;  
 you love righteousness and hate wickedness.  
 Therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
 with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. (vv. 6-7)

And the Psalmist declared that God is a “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows...” (68:5a) Caring for children who are without proper care, like we do in supporting Thornwell and Calvary Home, would certainly be commended by James. By caring for these powerless people we put God’s word into practice. We are not only hearers of the word, but doers also. (1:22) When we give with no expectation of receiving in turn, we show true sacrificial love, and what it means to serve others in need.

Likewise, our care for those in grief, the sick and the hungry, the poor. The prophet Micah proclaims that God is not interested in ritual sacrifices:

With what shall I come before the Lord,  
 and bow myself before God on high?  
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
 with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
 with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
 the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"  
 He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
 and what does the Lord require of you  
 but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
 and to walk humbly with your God? (6:6-8)

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Mt. 25:31-48), Jesus revealed questions that would be on the final exam: questions about feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty. About showing hospitality to the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting those in prison. In fact, what we do for the least of these, we do for Jesus.

Historian Jeannine Olson noted John Calvin's contribution to modern society through his creation of welfare institutions. The city of Geneva during the Reformation period had many poor, widows, and orphans. Calvin himself came to Geneva as a French religious refugee. In his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541), Calvin established the General Hospital and designated the offices of deacon and deaconess to supervise citizens' works of mercy as the "doers of the pure religion" in care of the poor.

And perhaps the greatest example of such caring is that of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who cared for people dying of AIDS, leprosy, and tuberculosis. She founded soup kitchens, dispensaries and mobile clinics, children's and family counseling programs, orphanages, and schools.

Religion that is pure and undefiled is that produced by one who avoids self-deception and bridles his tongue, who cares for widows and orphans. Then a third and final thing James says is that this is the kind of religion practiced by the person who "keeps unstained by the world."

Here James uses the sacrificial language of "the lamb without blemish. (Ex. 12:5) Christ was like a lamb without spot or blemish. (1 Peter 1:19) He doesn't mean that Christians are to

have nothing to do with the affairs of ordinary life. But rather that we are no longer oriented to values of the world, like power, wealth, pleasure, and self-centeredness. Paul said much the same in Romans 12:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (vv. 1-2)

Thus does James uplift a religion that is characterized by true piety, control of the tongue, and care for the afflicted. It's wonderful to come together in Worship in a lovely sanctuary. It's important to sing, to pray, to confess, to hear God's word, to offer our gifts, and to have fellowship with one another. But such worship should send us forth to love God and our neighbor, and to walk more purely amongst the tempting ways of the world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.