

Julie Merritt Lee
September 27, 2009

Providence Baptist Church
Hendersonville, North Carolina

“Worthless Religion?”

James 1:26-27

“Most religion is not gospel. Most religion is idolatry. Most religion is self-aggrandizement.”¹

We must distinguish between cultural religion and Christian gospel.²

Look at religion in America today. For the most part it is a consumer religion reflecting our culture. We create a product and try to sell it, usually with the strategy that it will make you feel better, guaranteed. This is why the “health and wealth” gospel is so prevalent. Why people want church to be more of a parade than a holy encounter with the Divine. The church in America in large part has acquiesced to the culture. Do we have ears to hear what those outside our country say about our religion? Eugene Peterson, most well-known as the author of the paraphrased Bible entitled *The Message*, says many Third World countries notice mostly our “greed, the silliness, the narcissism. They appreciate the size and prosperity of our churches, the energy and the technology, but they wonder at the conspicuous absence of the cross, the phobic avoidance of suffering, the puzzling indifference to community and relationships of intimacy.”³

The Scripture for today defines worthless religion and contrasts it with pure and undefiled religion. Listen to what it says, “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 distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Before we take on religion wholesale, let’s start with the first culprit James mentions: the tongue. Why the tongue? Because it betrays us—we say one thing and do another, making us, making the church, hypocrites to the world. Last week the focus was on “doing,” but this verse seems to indicate that even if we’re doing—the outward religious works—praying, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, but if we don’t tame/control our tongues, our religion is still worthless.

But think about what words are—they are things—entities that have the power to heal and kill. We talked a little last week about “logos” the Greek word for “word,” but the Hebrew understanding of the “word” was not just speech or utterances, but that which creates. Words have the power to bring life. Think of Creation, God spoke the words “Let there be light,” and light was created. God used words to speak creation into being. Words have creative power or they have destructive power. And according to James 3, the small words that come off of a small instrument, the tongue, have the power to guide the whole body, just like the bit in a horse’s mouth or the small rudder in a giant ship.

¹ Eugene Peterson, “Under the Unpredictable Plant” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1992), 34.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 37.

We've heard the adage, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." This is a lie.

We know that words have power. Think of those we know (or maybe you have experienced this personally) who heard damaging words from their parents, abusive words, and the result leads to a life-time of overcoming the belief that they are insignificant, worthless. Their whole life they struggle to believe that they are fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God.

For those of you who are married, you know the words that will push your spouses buttons—"You're acting like your mom...", "You've never been able to...", "You're always such a"

And gossip. Isn't it really a way of saying who's okay and who's not, but of course it's done through the back door. We talk about people behind their back when the only weakness this shows is our own, for not having the courage to talk to people face to face.

Bridling our tongue doesn't seem to be a virtue in our country any more. Recently, there was an ABC News piece exposing our public incivility. It referenced Serena Williams yelling out great profanities at the judge at the US Open, a senator telling a president he lies, and rapper Kanye West's ripping the mic away from someone at an awards show, so he could have the limelight. We need to be called back to a very important verse, Ephesians 4:29, "Don't let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

Let us use our words to build others up. Affirm the cashier at Chick-fil-A that her smile is beautiful, compliment your spouse, let your words open up another person's spirit to the possibility of grace and gospel.

And then for the one, two punch: James says pure and undefiled religion is this: Take care of the orphans and widows in distress. This had been the design from the very beginning of God's covenant. Isaiah called the whole earth to hear: "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." In Deuteronomy 14:29, it explains that since the Levites and resident aliens, orphans, and widows had no allotment or inheritance, every third year God's people were to bring a full tithe of produce for that year and store it in the town, so they could come and have their fill. Why the orphan and widow? Because these are people who have lost something dear to them. And the Gospel is always to the Lost: those who have lost their way, their minds, their sight, their heart. And to lose someone as dear as a parent or spouse is to lose part of one's self, and God and the gospel are all about making things whole again.

Believe it or not, we haven't always had non-profit agencies. The church was it—it was the place where the hungry could be fed, where the widows and orphans were taken care of. We're missing out on our mission, if this in some way doesn't define our religion.

So what's the answer? If the church has removed itself from its true mission, will the radicals stand up? The revolutionaries that want change? The emergent church?

On first glance radicals and revolutionaries who want to deconstruct the church seem like they would fall under "pure and undefiled religion." They've witnessed the hypocrisy and underbelly of the machinations of institution, and they call for something better. The problem is that they never create anything better. Their agenda (inevitable they have one) pushes them to their own self-focused front.

For example, in Russia during the time Dostoevsky lived (in the mid- nineteenth century) society was extremely superficial. Many didn't do any real work, they were just living off the hard work of the peasantry. People blindly followed protocol and image. And then it happened, as it always does, intellectuals began to gather and speak up their mind. They were fed up with the structure of the czar, church, government and wanted to create a healthier society. They resisted all authority—God, church, state—wanting to break it all down, only to rebuild something better. The problem is that these anarchists and socialists went overboard. They moved God out of the picture and justified even murders to achieve this new way for people. Dostoevsky was initially attracted to these intellectuals and was even sent to Siberia as a result of his association. But instead of making him more of a radical, he became counterradical. He was moved by this woman who came to visit him every day and made the sign of the cross over him. She also gave him a New Testament. He decided instead of becoming an adherent of a socialist utopia, he would cling to the roots of the cross.⁴

This is why any radicalism outside of Christ won't work. We've already been called to be fools for Christ. This is the way we are shown—this is pure and undefiled religion. I try to be wary of people that have invented a new church or a new way to God, essentially a new religion. Many times behind radicalism and revolutionaries are their own inflicted wounds, serving to motivate their personal agendas, outside of the way of Christ. That's why that last part of the definition of pure and undefiled religion as James puts it is "to keep oneself unstained by the world." I think this is what he means. Don't get caught up in the ways the world promotes religion—materialism, commercialism, its all used under the banner of religion. I get skeptical of easy 3-step way to grow your church. Someone failed to mention to these marketers that the church doesn't function as a corporation with a CEO, or at least it shouldn't.

In the book *God is Not...*, in the chapter "God is Not Religious," William Cavanaugh makes it clear that the part that makes religion bankrupt in America is not that it's organized. He says, "To be against organized religion is like being against organized hospitals." He goes on to criticize religion, not to vindicate the idea of "spirituality." In fact, he thinks spirituality is an extension of what wrecks have on Christians in the same vein that religion does. He says it this way, "And what is wrong with religion is ... [that it] has been used to turn faith in God into a consumer item for our private consolation and amusement... When I claim that God is not religious, I mean to say that 'religion,' like

⁴ Peterson, 52-53.

‘spirituality,’ has been used to privatize Christian practice, marginalize it from common life, bury God deep within the confines of the individual self, and thereby turn the individual over to the disciplines and designs of the nation-state and the market.”⁵

What Cavanaugh is speaking to is worthless religion that James is also pointing us to. It’s private, individual with no extension to the other—the widow and the orphan. We’re being called to a higher religion, one that lives and breathes outside us—pure and undefiled by our culture’s consumerism and “me” attitude.

This is our calling. Are we participating in a worthless religion? Are we answering the call to take care of those with less, the lost, the least?

Maybe we should listen to those Third World countries and wonder ourselves at the “conspicuous absence of the cross, the phobic avoidance of suffering” and intimacy. Let us be girded to action not by moralism or pietism but the person of Christ who comes alongside us, calling us not to an easy life but a good one, where we can say “I’ve done it to the least of these. I’ve done it unto you.” Amen.

⁵ D. Brent Laytham, ed. *God is Not...*, William T. Cavanaugh “God is Not Religious,” (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004) 98.