**God’s Religion August 1, 2021**

**James 1:19-27**

19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. 22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing. 26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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 (NRSV).

I’m going to start with question; why are you a Christian? The title of today’s message is *God’s Religion*. I thought about the title *Our Religion* but it is really God’s religion. It is about our relationship with the Lord and our response to the Lord. I use the title Lord here instead of God because it includes both God and Jesus.

In today’s Scripture teaches us that religion is not a casual thing that you can choose to ignore or take for granted, it calls for a serious commitment. We are challenged to respond to the Word of God. James addresses a contrast between those that do what the Bible teaches and those that consider they are religious but do not follow the Bible. The righteous embrace virtues and rid their selves of vices and remain pure in a defiled world. He specifically emphasizes that it is not enough to hear the word but you must respond to the Word of God. This includes taking action to care for the needy especially the orphans and the widows as they are particularly neglected in the culture of that time and location.

The lesson is on religious authenticity. For religion to be authentic it has to be pleasing to God which includes controlling the tongue and caring for the widows and the orphans. Authentic religion is not about customs, tradition, and rituals – if you do these things then you will be righteous. It is not about burnt offerings, a sacrifice, or obeying laws to earn God’s favor. Authentic religion is a contrast to these actions. Instead of trying to win God’s favor through your actions, your actions are a response to God’s love. You help those in need of help because God’s religion is about love and relationship. To be authentic, pure, true, is to be active in the relationship. Being in relationship with the divine is shown through worship, living a moral life, love, compassion, and reaching out to the needy. The lessons that James teaches are parallel with the lessons of the Old Testament prophets and the lessons of Jesus. Throughout the Bible God gives to the people, and God looks after the people. We are to help God in doing this.

When I was a child growing up I was sometimes Mama’s little helper. She was a housewife. She did it all of the cooking, cleaning, housework, made up our beds, and did the laundry. Well, to be in relationship you help each other out. I did a few things once in a while. But confess that when I was a child, I took the relationship for granted and did very little to help out. When she got sick and ended up in the hospital I picked up all of the housework. This was an action that was in response to her love. We are in a relationship with God and we are to help God look after and care for the people. We are not to take this relationship for granted and ignore the work that God needs done through human hands here on the earth. God’s religion is pure, undefiled, and embraces stewardship. Just as God gives to the people and looks after the people we are to continue to give to the people and look after the people.

The challenge for us is to live by the moral lessons that the Bible teaches - that is to embrace the virtues and rid ourselves of the vices. We are to actively respond to the word, not just listen to the word, but take action. Our problems do not come on Sunday morning; our problems come to us when we have to face the rest of the world. We get a one hour pep rally for a one hundred hour ball game. When you are in the middle of the game you are faced with challenges and emotions and the other side keeps pushing you back. It is not easy to remember to embrace virtues and get rid of vices because Sunday morning promises wear off during the week and it is too easy to slip up. However, the Bible is very specific; there are multiple lessons that teach it is imperative to live the word of God. We have to come to terms with this and decide if you are or are not going to live by the Bible. Discerning this determines a change in lifestyle. Many times I am confronted with lapsed and almost all of them are OK with their lack of religion but James classifies this as deception. The number one excuse that I frequently hear is “I’m religious, I just don’t come to church and you don’t need to come to church to be religious.” That is not what the Bible teaches. This is why it is so important to understand that this is God’s religion. The Bible teaches that you have to hear the word and respond to the word. You have to discern, reflect upon, and do the moral soul searching to determine if you are or are you not going to live by the Bible. This lesson is connected to *The Parable of the Sower* where the seed that fell in the fertile ground represents one that hears the word, receives the word, and responds to the word. The genuine religious person does not just hear the word but actively responds to the word. You do not achieve righteousness by doing the right things; you do the right things because you are righteous.

Being a Christian is not just something that you do or something that you can pick and choose to do out of several other things to choose from. It is lifestyle where you are no longer living according to standards of the world. You are called to be different from the rest of society. We risk being influenced by the values of society and the behavior of the majority. We struggle to live a moral life when we are surrounded by temptation. Again I ask the important question that I asked earlier; why are you a Christian? I was taking a college class on campus in Norfolk. It was a counseling course on diversity that was about serving the needs of those that are different. When we talked about different religions the teacher mentioned that she embraced the Native American religion. When someone asked why, she said “This is what works for me.” Well, God’s religion is not about what works for me. It is about God reaching through the cosmos to us. So, it is very important to think and understand why you are a Christian. Christianity is special and unique when compared to other world religions. In the other religions of the world people are trying to reach out to God. In Christianity, God is reaching out to us.

God cares for and helps the people. We serve God by loving and helping others. Having faith is a matter of living in manner that is shaped by the words of Jesus declaration to love your neighbor as yourself. God’s religion not dependant on rituals, it is religion that cares for the needy. When you are in relationship with God, you engage in that relationship by doing the things that God needs help with. This is God’s religion.