

# Christian Faith...

## The Real Deal or a Waste of Time?

November 1, 2006

### I. By way of review.

1. Life's greatest ally is **attitude**. (vv 1-2)
2. God is working in your life through every situation you encounter; your responsibility is to **cooperate** with that work through **faithful obedience**. (vv 2-8)
3. Humble circumstances test our toughness; but **affluence** tests our character. (vv 9-12)
4. Sin is the unavoidable consequence of your succumbing to the temptation to believe right is **wrong** and wrong is **right**. (vv 13-18)
5. Personal anger toward undesirable circumstances will **always** interfere with God's work in my life and will **never** lead toward spiritual maturity. (vv 19-21)
6. **Knowing** what to do has never been your biggest problem; your biggest problem is **doing** what you know to do. (vv 22-25)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In your opinion, what is the least attractive characteristic about religion?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
2. In your opinion, what are the most winsome characteristics about religion?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_

### II. If A=B & B=C then A=C

#### James 1:26-27

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

1. The Value of "A"—a **genuine faith**. (v. 26a)

Obviously, not all faith is genuine. Some is misinformed, and some is intentionally fraudulent. Examples abound...

A. Explained negatively...

**QUOTE**

From the Greek word “*Threskos*, religious piety. The word denotes the scrupulous observance of religious exercise—in action or words—sincerely or hypocritically performed in the guise of devout religion. The word describes one who stands in awe of the gods, and is scrupulous in what regards them.”<sup>1</sup>  
“*Threskos*...refers to the external observances of public worship, such as church attendance, almsgiving, prayer, fasting... It is the Pharisaic element in Christian worship.”<sup>2</sup>

**Mark 7:1-8, 13**

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and <sup>2</sup>saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were “unclean,” that is, unwashed. <sup>3</sup>(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. <sup>4</sup>When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

<sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with ‘unclean’ hands?”

<sup>6</sup>He replied, “**Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:**

“ ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

<sup>7</sup>They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’

<sup>8</sup>You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

<sup>13</sup>“Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

- *Threskos* goes to church, sings the songs, joins with the prayers of others, and might even give some money, although probably nowhere nearly as much as it wants everyone else to believe...
  - *Threskos* looks like Christian faith...
  - And when it's at church it even acts like Christian faith...
  - But when it's not at church *threskos* is the kind of faith that doesn't mean anything...
    - It looks like faith only when it's at church...

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<sup>1</sup> Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key To The Greek New Testament* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976), 726.

<sup>2</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. VI, “General Epistles/Revelation” (Broadman, Nashville, 1933), 24.

- When it's somewhere else...it is something else...
- James says its "worthless" (*mataios*, vain, empty, dead).

#### B. Explained Positively

- A genuine faith, then, would be the antithesis of *threskos*.
  - It's the person that doesn't separate the secular from the sacred.
  - It's the person whose faith in Christ has apprehended them so that regardless of where they are, they're always the same.

**A MATURE FAITH IS EVIDENCED BY A LIFE-STYLE AND LIFE CHOICES THAT ARE CONSTANLY AND CONSISTENTLY IN HARMONY WITH BIBLICAL KNOWLEDGE.**

#### DISCUSSION QUESTION

Please re-read the Mark 7 passage.

How would you define *threskos* in your own words, through things that you have seen and/or done yourself?

#### 2. The Value of "B"—a faith that pleases God. (vv. 26b-27a)

A. First, James says a faith that pleases God controls our speech.

- James has a lot to say about our speaking habits in this book, most notably in chapter 3, but he alludes to it in all 5 chapters.
  - There are few things that are as destructive to your reputation as a Christ-follower as an undisciplined tongue.
  - And there are few things that are as hard to get under control, either.

#### **ILLUSTRATION**

His name was Luther, and I knew him twenty-five years ago. He had just moved to Oklahoma from California where he'd been involved as a church-planter for the Southern Baptist Convention for several years. In one of the churches he started there was a woman that was hard to deal with—she gave most of the money, but she didn't like Luther's style. And she spent a lot of energy telling as many people as she could about it.

One Sunday morning at the conclusion of the service Luther invited the people to pray at the altar if they wanted to confess their sin and give it to God. Luther said he didn't know whether to run out the door or just meet her half way for a showdown when he saw her headed his way, but he just stood there.

She said, "Pastor, I've been saying a lot of awful things about you, and I want you to know that this morning I've come to give my tongue to the Lord."

Luther said, "Well sister, this altar's about 16' across; I think if you double it, it just might fit!"

Needless to say, Luther moved along soon thereafter.

- We'll talk more about the speech issue when we get to chapter 3.

B. Second, a faith that pleases God isn't deceived.

### **Luke 18:9-14**

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup>“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup>“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

- This guy isn't hiding anything from anyone...
- He isn't pretending to be something he's not, and he isn't patting himself on the back for what he's trying to make anyone else believe he is...
- He's merely a sinful man depending on the grace of a merciful God.

### **ILLUSTRATION**

I've known men like this guy over the years. One of them is Johnny Bisagno. I've been around him in all sorts of settings—when no one knew him and when everyone knew him; when the spotlight was on him and when it wasn't; it never mattered. He was the same man all of the time. Even though he was, at one time, as well known as any pastor in America, it never showed. It didn't matter who was in the crowd, when you were talking to him, yours were the only eyes he saw, yours was the only voice he heard...

Now, let me tell you about Max Lucado. I had a very high opinion of Max before I met him. He's sold more than 70 million books, and from reading them you would assume he's very kind and gracious and winsome and friendly. You may know this already, but last fall he spoke here a couple of times, and I had a chance to spend a few hours with him. Have you ever had the experience of liking someone a lot more before you got to know them? I have... But not with Max. He is the single most gracious and accommodating person I've ever been around in my life. He's this big celebrity, loaded from his book sales, but he got the biggest kick out of stealing the cookies out of some of the ladies' lunch boxes and blaming his sister. He came to our city and to our church without making a single demand, was humble at every point, and stayed as long as there was a single person that wanted to talk to him, and more impressive than all of that, when signing books for kids, he's just get down on a knee and spend as much time with every one of them as if they'd been his publisher.

What I'm saying about Johnny and Max is that they are what they appear to be.

### 3. The Value of "C"—an approved faith.

James only mentions two things here to describe real faith. There aren't just two. But these two are samples of the stock...parts of the whole. They're the kind of things that real faith produces.

#### A. The outward test of altruism; (v. 27b)

No profession of faith has biblical validity if it fails to embrace the attitude which states, "I am my brother's keeper." To care for others is a biblical constant from beginning to end.

- To "look after" means to *oversee* or be their *bishop*...
  - It means a lot more than a casual visit.
  - It implies pastoral ministry...getting to know them, and letting them get to know you, sharing your life with them in a hands-on manner.
- He illustrated this truth with the two most desolate classes of people that existed in his day, orphans and widows—and there were a lot of both back then.
  - Their climate toward children wasn't like ours—and it wasn't better.
    - Orphaned children just wandered the streets like little vagabonds until someone took them in, hired them as indentured servants, or until they were stolen by slave traders for bartering material.
    - It was horrible...God said, *help them*...
  - Widows weren't much better off...
    - She had no social standing, and often ended up as a prostitute.
    - And God says, *help them too*.
- When he uses the word "distress" he's uses the word *thlipsei* that means any kind of *pressure, burden, anguish, & etc.*
  - Real faith doesn't just talk about these things...
  - Real faith gets involved...

#### B. The inward test of integrity. (v. 27c)

- It's a mistake to assume this means avoiding contact with the world...
  - It means just the opposite...
  - It means being right in the middle of the world, but not allowing the world to get in the middle of you.

- Our direction isn't so much that we're to try not to do wrong, though we are, but that we are to blister our souls doing what's right.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you think God is hard to please? If so, can you explain? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Which seems to be a greater test of your faithful obedience: the outward aspect of helping others or the inward aspect of maintaining personal integrity? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Conclusion

So if "A" = "B" & "B" = "C" then "A" = "C" which is to say, if genuine faith is a faith that pleases God, and if a faith that pleases God is a faith that is altruistic and has integrity, then all faith that is genuine is both outwardly altruistic and possessed of inward integrity.