

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scriptures: James 1:19-27; Mark 7:31-37

"True Religion"

WHAT IS TRUE RELIGION?

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Webster's defines religion as *"the service and worship of God, gods, or the supernatural (2) : commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance; 2 : a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices; : a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith."*

Religion has been part of the history of man from the very beginning of creation. Every culture and civilization has had religion. It is man's attempt to understand the purpose and meaning of life and to embody that understanding in a series of beliefs, traditions, rituals and practices.

For some, religion is purely superstitious – it's man's attempt to alleviate his fears and cope with the anxieties of life. For others, they view religion as a bondage, holding man under the control of a ruling class. Karl Marx, the author of the philosophy of his theory of Marxism, called religion "the opiate of the people." What Marx meant was just as opium alleviates the pain of suffering and injury, so too, religion, provides false illusions of hope that help people cope with life. Furthermore, such illusions make one less to change the class structure of society and the ills that such structures cause, thereby preventing the necessary revolution. Finally, there are those who like to say that religion has lead to the deaths of more people than any other thing in life.

And do you know what? All of the above is true – if one is speaking of FALSE religion – False religion is superstitious. False religion does keep people in bondage. False religion is like a drug. And false religion does lead to death physically because spiritually it is dead. False religion is not only not true – it cannot impart life.

But not so with true religion. When one speaks of true religion, it has two components – 1) the objective reality that it represents – in other words, that which it proclaims as true, and 2) the subjective reality of the response to that truth – what the Bible calls faith. Faith – that is trusting in something as true and right – is a necessary component to true religion and I might add to false religion. In other words, you can sincerely believe, have faith that something is true when it really is not. False religion would not survive unless its adherents had faith in it.

You have heard me say it before and you will hear me say it again – everyone has faith; it is just a question in whom or what we are placing faith. The amount of faith is not what is most important; otherwise Jesus would not have said if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains. Are we

actually moving the mountains? No, God is the only One who can – so we are simply trusting God. It is never faith in faith.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TRUE RELIGION

And so true religion is religion that is true and religion that is truly practiced by its followers. You need both. Let's see how James, the brother of Jesus, tackles the issue of true religion – or religion that he calls pure and undefiled.

This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; 20for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. 21Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. 22But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

26If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. 27Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

QUICK TO HEAR, SLOW TO SPEAK, SLOW TO ANGER

In Mark 7:31-37 we have the healing of the man who could not hear or speak. Jesus commanded the impediments to be removed when He said "BE OPENED!" Think of those words for a moment. Opened to what? Just to the sounds of creation, just to be able to speak words? No, Jesus did not come to first bring healing to the body or the physical world; He came to bring healing to the inner nature of man, to our hearts, to our spirit. In healing the man, Jesus was showing him where true life and true religion is found. In Jesus!

And for that to happen, we have to be open to not only the reality of God but to the fear of God – to following God. The whole ministry of Jesus was to confirm that He indeed is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God and that trusting in Him would not only bring meaning and purpose to our lives in showing us what life is all about but that we could have eternal life with Him. But one must be open and that means being quick to listen, slow to speak, and of course slow to anger – to raise one's fist to the Lord.

I remember doing a funeral at St. Bart's back in the late 90's. Ned Wood, our sexton at the time, told me that one of the attendees left the church during the middle of the service; and after he went outside, Ned saw him raising his fist to the sky. The man was clearly mad at God. While we can be upset at the way things happen and question why, we can't stay angry. Anger never accomplishes the righteousness of God as James reminds us!

How many people are too busy to listen to what God might be saying, to what Jesus says? How many are truly seeking after the truth? I can ask the same question for many who are church members but don't take the time to grow in the faith.

PUTTING ASIDE ALL FILTHINESS AND WICKEDNESS

Part of coming to God is not only being open, but being willing to admit you are a sinner. Remember last week when we looked at the reason for our unrighteousness and sin – it comes from our hearts. There is nothing we can do ourselves to control or change our hearts apart from the help of the Living God. Recall the Word of the Lord in Isaiah, *“All of our righteousness is like a filthy garment that wears out!”* But we have to admit it. That is what repentance is. Admitting that we go in a wrong direction when we trust in the flesh and instead turning back to the Lord and His ways.

IN HUMILITY RECEIVE THE WORD IMPLANTED

But we are not just turning away from our sin; we are also turning to the Lord to receive in HUMILITY the Word of God. It is the very Word of God – the Living Word – Jesus Christ – and all that is expressed through Him that is written down and proclaimed that changes us. That helps us to see what truly is right and good and perfect and acceptable in God’s sight. It is the Word that gives us direction and soundness for our souls. It is the Word that imparts life. But the only way to receive that Word is with humility.

It is why a daily diet of the word of God is so important to our spiritual growth. But we must not fall into the trap of reading and studying the Word just to say we did it, or just to learn facts, or to be more familiar with its teachings. No, we study the word with humility, letting it speak to us, letting it show us where we need to improve, letting it direct and rule our hearts in conformity with the Holy Spirit’s leading.

PROVE YOURSELVES DOERS OF THE WORD

If we truly believe in something, our life will reflect it. True religion is not only accepting the truth, it is practicing it. And James’ warning *“hearers who delude themselves”* brings the danger home of what can happen in the church or in the life of the believer! The law of liberty is the law of following Christ! Jesus said, *“You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free!” (Jn. 8:32)*. Notice James says that true religion is looking intently on the law of liberty, which is really the law of love, and then abiding by it! And when we do so, we will be blessed!

KEEP THE TONGUE IN CHECK AND HELP THOSE IN NEED

James closes with another admonition to make sure we control our tongues. Loose lips not only sink ships but they sink our relationships with others and with the Lord. In addition, are we really meeting the needs of those around us when those needs become apparent? What is true about widows and orphans? Not only did they have physical needs as a result of their loss but they had relational needs. The Church is to be our family especially when we have no family!

True religion means being in loving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and with other people. We are called out of the world with its lusts and rebellion against God; we are called to crucify our flesh, and to be aware of the schemes of the devil to then go back into the world to make a difference for the Kingdom of God. But we must be open to the Word of the Lord, we receive His Word with humility, and we must put it into practice by being doers of that Word, all the while watching what we say; knowing that our words carry great power to build up and to tear down.

16th Sunday After Pentecost, September 9, 2018, Liturgical Year "B"

Yes, this is true religion – not trust in a philosophy of ideas or a set of rituals or an institution, but rather trust in the Living God as revealed in Jesus Christ that is reflected in a sincere and humble faith that seeks to grow in the Lord by obeying Him and reaching out to others in love. This, my brothers and sisters, is what life is all about. It is true religion and the one who practices it will always be blessed!