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August 29, 2021, James 1:17-21, 26-27, 2:5-8

Like many of you, I've been watching the events in Afghanistan this past week. Hearing about groups like the Taliban and Al Qaeda, it strikes me how wrong human beings can get religion. I say this being fully aware that American Christianity is far from perfect. In fact, it's really about the abuse of power. I happen be talking about religion today, but that abuse can happen in politics, in industry, in sports, or in any endeavor.

Years ago, I came across a quote by author Nick Annis. I'll paraphrase his take on this. He wrote: [The Bible is] an oral history. It was passed down, word-of-mouth, parent to child, from Adam to Seth, from Seth to Enos to Cainan, for forty generations, a growing, changing story... until Moses finally gets it down on lambskin. But lambskin's wear out, and need to be recopied. Copies of copies of copies of an oral history passed down through forty generations. From Hebrew it was translated into Latin and Greek and eventually English...

He writes, "You can't put a grocery list through that many translations, copies, and retellings, and not expect to have some big changes in the dinner menu when the kids make it back from [Market Basket]. And yet people are killing each other over [the] written word.

Here's a tip," Annis writes: "if you're killing someone in the name of God, you're missing the message." I have to say, I agree with him on that. I think we can add if you're abusing or persecute women in the name of religion, you're missing the message. If you're blowing up people at the airport, you're missing the message. If you force to convert people to your way of thinking, you're missing the message. It's astonishingly easy to get religion wrong.

In fact, even members of the earliest churches often missed the message of Jesus. The letter of James and the letters attributed to the Apostle Paul were written to churches, largely to correct either beliefs or behaviors. Those first Christians often got things very wrong.

In our reading today, James offers some corrective wisdom. First, he warns that if you let your anger get the best of you, it's an indication that you're missing the message. He writes, "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

Have you noticed there's a lot of angry people these days? If you haven't noticed, just get a Facebook account. You'll see it. Watch the coverage of public meetings anywhere in the country. James warns against losing control of our anger. He said, "your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

In other words, our anger doesn't please God. It doesn't even make anything better. We all feel justified when we get angry, but the fact that we're angry about something, doesn't mean we're right. According to James, the way to be faithful is to be slow to anger.

Secondly, James said, "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." That is to say if we think religion is only about believing the right things, we're missing the message. If we hear the word of God, but we don't put what we hear into action, we the whole point.

Be doers of the word, James instructs. Do you remember when you learned the Golden Rule? "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." It's one thing to have those words

memorized. It's another thing to actually treat people accordingly in daily life. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That means we don't get to pick and choose who we love. We are to love whoever happens to be our neighbor. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." How many of us have heard those words a hundred times yet we still worry about our lives?

According to James, good religious practice requires keeping our anger in check. Secondly, good religion means putting the word or the teachings of Jesus into practice in our lives. James also wrote, "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless."

James appears to be saying that we can go to church every Sunday. We can read our Bible and pray constantly, but if we can't be careful about how we talk to people, it isn't just unfortunate. According to James, it makes our religion worthless. We've misunderstood what discipleship of Jesus Christ is all about.

Finally, James gives us what he thinks is good religion in a nutshell. He writes, "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." There are all kinds of religion out there. There's good and bad religion. There are people who get the message and people who don't. Religion that is pure and undefiled, is to care for widows and orphans and to keep from being corrupted by the ways of the world.

James makes it simple, but we might ask a question. Why only widows and orphans in distress? Why name them specifically? Jesus did a similar thing. When he began his ministry, in Luke's Gospel, he went to the synagogue and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

He read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

When he was done, he rolled up the scroll and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus was the Savior of the entire world. He loved everyone. Why would he indicate that his ministry was specifically for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed?

I think the answer is that God loves everyone. It's almost like parents with children. I have a sister who is 2 ½ years older than me. I was thinking back to when we were kids. My parents were very careful to make sure that neither of us went without. If she had an ice cream cone, I had to have an ice cream cone. If I got new clothes for the new school year, she had to get new clothes. Even if we didn't get the same stuff, my parents were careful to make sure each of us got what we needed. That's good parenting.

Imagine God's despair at so many in our world going without basic necessities and suffering persecution. Every person on earth is a child of God. In fact, I once heard God described as an aging woman whose main concern is that each of her children get their share of the inheritance.

I think James singles out widows and orphans because, in first century Palestine, they were the most vulnerable people. Very often, widows and orphans were poor, destitute, and had few, if any, prospects for the future. Jesus named the poor, the captive, the blind, and the

oppressed, because God doesn't give up on anybody. To God, all lives matter, which is why good religion has to include caring for the most vulnerable and the suffering and the persecuted.

This past week, we saw some tragic events carried out by people who are missing the message of religion. I think it's vital to lament and to grieve the loss of life, but perhaps the best thing we can do is to overwhelm bad religion with a good religion: to move from anger to resolve, to be hearers AND doers of the word, to speak words of hope and encouragement.

I'll tell you, the times in my life when I feel closest to Jesus, is when I join him in his work. To bind up the wounded, to share bread with the hungry, to befriend the lonely, to align with those on the margins is like getting a little glimpse of heaven on earth.

If we can overwhelm religion gone wrong with good religion, then maybe healing can come. Then maybe God will delight. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am."