

Three Essentials for Effective Christianity Today
James 1:22-27

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But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. . . . 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. Jas. 1:22, 27

The Chicago Cubs have hired a new manager. According to at least one report I read, the choice came down to two finalists who were neck and neck in the running. The tipping point that made them choose one over the other was a mock spring training speech. Those who were doing the hiring asked candidates during the course of their interviews to give a speech they might give during spring training, before the season starts, to inspire the players.

The Book of James is rather like a kind of spring training speech. It comes from fairly early in Christianity. There are several young Christian churches spread out over an area. They are scattered. They are small. They are struggling. They need encouraging. James, a leader the home church at Jerusalem (Acts 15) and maybe the brother of our Lord, writes to these churches to encourage them and to strengthen them in their hope and perseverance.

We can glean three essentials for effective Christianity today from this pep talk of a letter from long ago. These essentials are tightly woven into these lines from James, chapter one:

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. . . .
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.

The first essential is to hear the word of God.

Our text puts the emphasis on doing the word of God, but it does not neglect hearing the word of God. Hearing the word – having some sense of what the Christian gospel is – comes first before there is any call to action at all. Be doers of the word and not mere hearers of it; hearing appears second in the phrase but it is first in experience. Hear the word of God, and then do it.

The word to hear is the truth of the gospel. The word to hear isn't some teaching about the church or even some teaching about the Bible. The word to hear is the word of the gospel that gave rise to the church that gave rise to the Bible.¹ We cannot take time this morning to pause over any piece of this gospel, but we can name some of its strong and life-giving themes.

The word to hear toward effective Christianity today is the word that tells you that God is your Creator. It is the word that tells you that you are made in the image of God. It is the word that tells you that God is love and you are loved by God. It is the word that tells you that you are forgiven in spite of all your shortcomings and mistakes and misjudgments. Nothing can separate you from the love of God! The word to hear is the word that tells you that you are called to some

¹ P. T. Forsyth, in F. W. Dillistone, *C. H. Dodd* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 134.

purpose; your life isn't a mistake or a waste or some little pawn in a scheme. You are uniquely made, supremely loved, called to a purpose divine, and equipped and accompanied by God in and for this purpose. The word to hear is the good news that you are destined for eternity in God's good heaven. And what this gospel says about you, it says about everyone. There isn't a single person you meet who is gathered up into this truth, whether they know it or not. They are made by God in the image of God, loved by God, forgiven by God, equipped by God, and destined for life with God.

Hearing that truth over and over again is essential to effective Christianity today.

The second essential is to help others.

Hear the word of God and then help other. Hear the word of the gospel and then do it, put it into practice. Our text singles out caring for orphans and widows, and this emphasis is true all through the long line of scripture from Deuteronomy through Isaiah and through Jesus himself.

But I don't think the text means that our caring should be limited to orphans and widows. Jesus certainly did not limit his care to orphans and widows, and neither should we. They are in this text as representatives, I think, of all who suffer and struggle and have need. Christianity that puts its faith into practice cares for the poor at our gates, the refugees at our border, and the immigrants close at hand who are afraid of deportation. Christianity that puts its faith into practice cares for the children and teachers who are bullied at school, for the minorities who are oppressed, and for all who are suffering and struggling under some heavy load of life, even those who share the pews with you now.

But James goes further than simple caring for people. The Greek word *The New Revised Standard Version* translates into English as "care" in verse 27 – "care for orphans and widows" – is *episkeptesthai*. My Greek New Testament – it is an interlinear; I don't know Greek well enough to translate it myself from the bottom up – tells me that *episkeptesthai* is more than caring; it is visiting. Visit orphans and widows.

That puts a fuller dimension into this second essential for effective Christianity today. Long ago, sometime around the colonization of America, there was a man in Britain by the name of Lord Percival. He is described as a wealthy man highly interested in doing all the good he could do, provided he could do it from his upholstered chair in his townhouse.² He may have cared deeply for the plight of orphans and widows and others of need, but he did not *episkeptesthai* them. He did not go out to them.

Effective Christianity does not stay in its sanctuaries and say, "Tsk, tsk, isn't that a shame?" It gets involved on practical levels doing practical things to help particular people with particular needs. Helping others is the second essential to effective Christianity today. Hearing the word of God is the first; putting it into actual practice by helping others is the second.

The third essential is to see to your own integrity.

² Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 77.

This one is easy to miss in our text because it is tucked in at the very end. The emphasis is so much on helping others that we can miss the change of focus at the end: “and keep [yourselves] unstained by the world.”

There is a Graham Greene novel where he is describing a little girl and says, “The world was in her heart already, like the small spot of decay in a fruit.”³ A Wordsworth poem opens,

The World is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!⁴

It is this that James says it is essential for Christianity to guard against. Keep yourselves, he wanted those early and struggling Christian churches to know, keep yourselves unstained by the world.

New Testament scholars are often quick to say James and the Apostle Paul do not have much in common, but they do have this in common. James said, “keep [yourself] unstained by the world” and Paul said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom. 12:2) James and Paul may stand together and indict contemporary Christianity and say the reason churches may be ineffective in the world is because they are too much like the world; the reason we cannot convert secularism is because secularism has already converted us.

That is the third essential for effective Christianity today: guard your integrity as a Christian: keep your thinking, your valuing, your desiring, and your aspiring all close to God. Really be on the road you say you are on.

I don’t know what the new Cub manager said in his mock spring training speech. Typically, I think, spring training speeches have in them little that is new and rely very much on basics.

So, here, James, in his teaching toward effective Christianity puts a strong emphasis on the basics. I think we can discern in his remarks here in chapter one the two great commandments from the Old Testament: Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one, and you are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and you are love your neighbor as yourself.

James is telling these young, small, scattered, struggling churches there are three essentials to effectiveness: hear the word of God, help others, and see to your own integrity. Do these and you will have a good season and win many hearts.

³ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: Viking, 1940, 1968, 1990), p. 104.

⁴ *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*, compiled by Roy J. Cook (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1958), p. 48.