

Pure Religion

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary time, August 31, 1997: Scripture Lessons: Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In a few weeks Encounter 97 will begin, a week of evangelistic preaching, under a tent, near the old Sunset Park, sponsored by the Oxford Ministerium and other churches in the Southern Chester county area. I have looked over the list of participants in the counselor training events and see that people from the Methodist, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian and Presbyterian Churches are involved, not to mention many other denominations. It will not be a "holy roller" service. It will all be very respectable. The atmosphere will not be much different from our annual ecumenical Thanksgiving service except that Steve Wingfield, an evangelist will preach. Steve is an ordained Methodist preacher. He will preach evangelistic messages aimed to convert those who do not know Christ as Lord and Savior. He will also encourage Christians to recommit their lives to Christ.

At the end of every sermon he will invite people to come forward and meet with counselors. Those who go will be asked three questions: First, why did you come forward? There are many reasons why people go forward. Some go because they're not sure of their relationship to Christ. Some go forward because they're having marital problems. Some go out of fear that they might go to hell if they die. Some go because they are struggling unsuccessfully with sins in their lives. There are many reasons people go forward. So the first question those who go forward will be asked is, "Why did you come forward?"

Secondly, they will be asked, "If you were to die tonight do you know for certain you would go to heaven? Various polls taken indicate that nearly everybody in the U.S. says they believe in heaven and hell. Most people who believe in hell don't believe they'll end up there. But many people do fear they might go to hell when they die. They're not sure that God loves them. They feel they have committed unforgivable sins. They hope they won't go to hell, but

they fear they will. So the second question that will be asked of those who come forward is, "Do you have assurance that if you were to die tonight you would go to heaven?"

The third question is, "If you were to die tonight and appear before God, what reason would you give him for letting you into heaven?" Now few churches stress more emphatically than the Presbyterian church that we are saved by God's grace through faith in Christ. And yet, typically, to the embarrassment of the pastors, Presbyterians say they hope they'll make it to heaven because they've been faithful in church attendance and aren't as bad as other people they know.

So the third question is the key question. "If you were to die tonight and appear before God, what reason would you give for letting you into heaven?" Hopefully, all of us are so theologically literate that we will answer in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism: Because I belong - body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." I would be so proud if you answered that way if you go forward. But I would also be happy if you gave the far simpler answer, "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so."

And this brings us to what James is saying to us in his letter. We're not sure who wrote the letter of James. There were at least three people named James in the early church. Traditionally the letter is ascribed to James, a man who was closely related to Jesus, who became the first Bishop of Jerusalem. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions him in his history of the Jews. He says that James was a very godly man, highly revered by most Jews. Eusebius, a church historian who lived in the fourth century, says that James had the reputation for being a man of prayer. He went to the temple daily to pray. He spent so much time praying for his nation that his knees became callused and people gave him the nickname, "camel knees".

Despite his reputation for godliness he had enemies. Josephus tells us that he was murdered by jealous enemies around 65 years after the birth of Christ.

From reading the letter to James I get the feeling that he had a lot of people in his congregation who could quickly and easily answer the three questions that will be asked of those who go forward at Encounter 97. They knew their Bibles. They knew the right answer to theological questions. And they knew they were saved. They were born again. They were sure they were going to heaven. They had heard the word of God's grace and had been given a new birth through receiving that word.

But James says that it's not enough to know the right answers to theological questions. They not only need to hear and receive the word of God. They need to obey it. The emphasis that James places on obedience makes a lot of Protestants feel uncomfortable. It sounds a little bit too much like salvation by works. The great Reformer Martin Luther emphasized more than anybody that we are saved by grace through faith. He didn't like the letter to James. He called it an epistle of straw. Too much emphasis on obedience and good works, and not much mention of God's free grace that comes through Christ.

But James doesn't contradict that we're saved freely by God's grace through faith in Christ. James is writing to complacent, Christians who are so certain of their salvation that they don't need to obey the Word of God. But James stresses two marks of a real Christian; two marks of a born again Christian.

The first mark is that born again Christians have born again tongues: He writes, "If any think they are religious (that is, born again Christians), and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless." Now, James is not talking about crude four letter swear words. He's talking about using our tongues to tear down. *John Calvin quote*

There's a story about Karl Barth which I love. Barth was the greatest theologian since John Calvin. Much of his work criticizes Frederick Schleiermacher, an eighteenth century German theologian. No body disagreed more vociferously with Schleiermacher than Karl Barth. Barth blamed Schleiermacher for most of the bad things that happened in the church during the

eighteenth century. Barth utterly hated and rejected the influence of Schleiermacher in the church. But he used to tell his students that when he got to heaven he was going to have a long talk with Schleiermacher. He hoped to see his nemesis in heaven. "I shall go up to him and say, 'Well, Schleiermacher, you saw some great things in your theology' and Schleiermacher will reply, 'Well, Barth, you saw some great things too.'" One of the marks of Christian faith is the ability to speak with love - especially with respect to those we don't like and with whom we are angry. That's a sign that we really are in a right relationship with God.

Then, secondly, compassion is a sign of the new birth. More important than the ability to give right answers is compassion that seeks to minister to those who are in need. "A pure and faultless religion in the sight of God the father is this: to look after orphans and widows in trouble." Today, this is still a critical test of faith. Compassion.

In an article I recently read by Tom Troeger, a professor of preaching, he writes, "What would happen if for the next two thousand years Christians focused first on living lives of love and justice? We might be surprised at how many hearts would be transformed by our actions - including our own."