

"Works Of Faith" James 1:17-27 Cantate Domino 2024

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

My understanding of what it means to be a baptized follower of Jesus Christ and a member of Christ's body has changed drastically over the (increasingly numerous) years of my life. As a child, life with Christ meant being pushed to Sunday school by my parents and forced to endure occasionally an incredibly boring worship service. As a teenager, it was being entertained, doing a lot of cool stuff, and hanging out with my friends. My involvement in the church expanded and my walk with Christ has deepened, as an adult and as a pastor.

Observing adults in several provinces and congregations, I think it is very difficult to get beyond simply wearing the label, "Christian," and attending worship services on a somewhat regular basis. There are several attractions to this type of Christianity. It doesn't cost much. It doesn't require much time and energy. But, our eternal salvation is taken care of and we hope that God will bless us and answer our prayers when we are in need.

This style of Christianity is not confined to the borders of Canada, nor is it a modern development. James addresses an easy faith in his letter. In his letter, the reader discovers that James has an entirely different concept of what it means to be a baptized follower of Jesus Christ and a member of Christ's body. His vision of the Christian life is explained in today's text.

One of the first ideas James shares with his readers is that Jesus gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

If you have grown up on a farm like I did or tended a garden, you understand the concept of first fruits. First fruits were the first "fruit"

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produced by trees, bushes, stalks, and animals. They are special for several reasons.

- In the Bible, the first 10 percent of a harvest was given as an offering to God. James intimates that as first fruits our lives are an offering to God. We are a thanksgiving offering to God for what God has done in our world and in our lives. Our lives are to be lived glorifying God and serving him. This is certainly a far cry from simply wearing the title “Christian.”

- Personally, I think the first fruits are the best produce of the harvest. Maybe it’s because first fruits are usually anticipated for a year. I remember savouring the first snap peas, carrots and raspberries. Through us, people can sample God’s love, and grace and savour what life in God’s kingdom is like. There is a missional quality to our lives—we go out into the world to reach people and change lives.

- First fruits are a promise of what is to come. Tasting that first orange or grapefruit encourages us to look up at the trees around us and imagine an abundant harvest. As first fruits, we are a sign that we are not the last of what God does. Rather we are a foretaste of what is to come. We are harbingers of hope.

Growing up I believed that Christianity was a list of do’s and don’ts, with an emphasis on don’ts. It was almost to the point that if it felt good, or looked fun and or exciting it had to be bad.

James reminds us that because of the forgiveness of our sins and our new relationship with God, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can live in the law of liberty. Jesus said that the greatest of the commandments was, “To love the Lord

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our God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.”

These commandments set us free to accomplish them in a variety of ways. Loving God is much more than simply not doing a list of items. We can love the Lord abundantly, creatively, and in ways that will stretch our imaginations. We can do the same as we love our neighbours. The emphasis is transferred from the don't to the do.

James ends this passage with a practical vision of what pure, or true, religion is. Pure religion is a life of service and commitment.

James isn't putting down the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, meditation, worship, fellowship, and prayer. He would understand that these practices enable us to hear God's word. James wants his readers to not only be hearers but also doers.

Pure religion is service. It involves reaching out, touching the lives of others, and ministering to their needs. It is walking our talk; putting our money where our mouth is. Pure religion is allowing our faith to become incarnate in our daily lives and thus in the world in which we live.

Pure religion is also being unstained by the world. This is a significant challenge because we can lead lives of service and be in the world without getting dirty. Pure religion invites us to get involved in life and ministry.

At the same time, we do not need to pick up the habits or teachings of the world. I think this involves more than another list of what we aren't supposed to do. Rather, I think it refers to the commitment we make to resist the selfishness and self-centeredness of the world and to keep our eyes on God and others.

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James paints a vibrant picture of what a new life in Christ is all about. With his broad brush strokes and vivid colours he invites us into his painting; to experience fully.

Certainly what James envisions is much much more than the McDonald's style of religion, which is common in Canada, where you drive up to the drive-thru and say, "Supersize me."

As God's first fruits, living out the law of liberty and exhibiting pure religion our entire life becomes an act of worship. Pure worship. With the power of the Holy Spirit, God-pleasing worship. Amen.