James 1:19-27 *Faith that Works: Listening and Doing*

***Can You Spot the Fake?***To start the sermon today, I want to play a little game with you. I want us to think about the difference between something that is authentic, and something that is fake. I’m going to put up two images that should be familiar to us all, but there will be slight differences. The question is: can you spot the fake?

(By the way, I mentioned to Beth and Ellie that I was looking for some good examples of this, and Ellie said: “Oh, that’s the ‘Mandela Effect!’” I’m pretty sure she has no idea who Nelson Mandela is; but she knew that this is a thing on Instagram. I guess the phenomenon got its name when news of Nelson Mandela’s death broke in 2013 and a whole bunch of people freaked out online because they were absolutely certain he had died in prison in the 1980s. So, the “Mandela Effect” is tha name given now to things that are not quite the way we remember them. Ellie sent me to an artcle online and all the images I am going to show you came from that article. I told Ellie I am going to put her on my research staff.)

**Here’s the first image**:



We all recognize that little guy. That’s Curious George! But can you spot the difference? One has a tail and one doesn’t. Which one is correct? Believe it or not, Curious George is a monkey without a tail!

**Here’s another one**.



A familiar brand. I think my t-shirt might be Fruit of the Loom. But which image is correct? Was there a cornucopia or not? Answer is: **no cornucopia**. Just the fruit. Rember the commericals with the guys wearing apple and grape costumes? Nobody walking around dressed like a big woven horn.

**Next one:**



Toucan Sam’s favorit sugary cereal. But how does Kellogg’s spell “fruit.” Do they spell it correctly, or do the double down on the double “o’s”? **Turns out proper spelling is out the window!**

**Here’s another one:**



Monopoly Man. The question is: monocle or no monocle? Which one is correct? Certainly a guy this dapper would have a monocle, wouldn’t he? **Nope.** Turns out, a lot of people confuse him with Mr. Peanut.

**How about this?**



Shoe brand. Has to be spelled with a “T” right? Stare at this one long enough and it will make your head hurt. **But there is no “T”.**

One more, another spelling one:



Correct spelling? Or the one that makes more sense for a cartoon? All the other spelling ones ended up spelling the word wrong to fit their brand, so it has to be the double “o”, right? **Wrong. T-U-N-E-S.**

Some times things are not as authentic as they seem**. And, as we will see in our scripture** passage today, sometimes Christians can be fakes. Sometimes people attend church and and wear crosses around their necks, they have the bumper sticker fish and the WWJD bracelets; but a closer look reveals there is less going on with Jesus than people want to make it appear. As the saying goes, too often the “walk” does not match the “talk.”

I mentioned a while back that I believe the single-most influential Christian music album ever made was **DC Talk’s JesusFreak**. At least, it is the single-most influential Christian music album in my life. I am amazed how often I am working on a sermon and I will think of lyrics from that album. Or, in this case, a quote. The song is called “What if I Stumble?” and it is an introspective look at what happens to others when we fail to live up to our profession of faith. “What if I stumble/What if I fall/What if a lose my step/and make fools of us all.” Really, it’s an example of something I talked about last week when I said we need to amplify the consequences of sin. Think about what happens when we stumble. And the song opens with an audio track of author **Brendan Manning, and this is what he says:**

The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.

And this problem is nothing new. When Mahatma Gandhi was a student in South Africa he often attended a Christian church. He was attracted to Christ and often read the New Testament. But, he never became a Christian. When asked why he said, “I got the impression that [Christians] were just a group of worldly-minded people going to church for recreation and conformity to custom. I have the highest admiration for the Christian life and for the Christ of the Bible. And I might have become a Christian if I could have seen one.”

Gandhi may have missed the main point of Christianity. It’s not all about behavior modification. In fact, the message of the gospel is that we will never be perfect this side of heaven. But his point is still well-taken: he didn’t see Christianity making much of a noticable difference in the lives of church-goes. He did not see them living out of their convictions. And he was left unconvinced.

This is something the letter of James is written to address. We started this series last week—we’re going through the book in 6 sermons—and the title I gave it is “Faith that Works.” The idea is that James believes our faith must be put to work; our belief in Jesus requires action for Jesus; faith that does not work is dead. A verse in today’s passage really sums up what we are going to talk about today, as well as the main message of the entire book. **James 1:22**:

**22**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Do what it says. Just do it. That’s the message of James. Your walk must match your talk. James is a practical book; and today’s message is: **Authentic Christians put their faith into practice.**

Let’s look at the text. Today we will be looking at James 1:19-27. 3 paragraphs in my Bible, three key charachteristics of authentic Christians.

***Two Ears, One Mouth***First, **authentic Christians are people under control.** True followers of Jesus work to put a harness on their anger. **Verses 19 and 20:**

**19**My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, **20**because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

James wants Christians to control their anger. Because anger is not conducive soil for the righteousnes God desires to grow in our lives.

I take verse 20 a couple of different ways. On the one hand, I think James is saying that angry Christians hurt our witness to the world. This is in line with the Brennan Manning quote. When non-believers look at believers and see anger and hatred and vitriol, they are not impressed.

This has to do with the public face of the Christian movement—the issues we platform and the way we approach them. When the non-believing world only associates Christianity with being anti- this and opposed to that; when we are only known for trying to dominate those who disagree with us; when the picture of Christianity is more of angry preachers and politicians decrying the evils of the world than of compassionate believers seeking to reach out to the disenfranchised and hurting; well, that is what the non-believing world finds unbelievable.

This also has to do with how we, as individual believers, present ourselves to those around us. When we become known for being short-tempered or pushy or rude; when people are afraid to have a conversaition with us because they aren’t sure when we might snap at them; when we are undisciplined and uncontrolled, that presents a poor advertisment for Jesus.

On the one hand, then, James is talking about anger being bad for our witness. But on the other hand, I think verse 20 is also saying: anger is bad for us. If we are angry all the time, it’s hard for any fruit of the spirit to flourish. An old proverb says: “Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.” Anger gets in the way of our walk with Jesus. It short circuits our growth in love and peace and patience. It’s hard for an angry person to be humble. It’s hard for an angry person to be kind.

How, then, do we become people under control? “Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” James has a lot to say about the words we speak, He’s going to mention it again in this passage, and chapter 3 has a whole section on taming the tongue.

The idea here is that the more listening we do, the less talking we will engage in, and the better control we will have on our anger. An ancient Greek philosopher named Zeno is credited for a line that moms everywhere have been using for ages: “God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason: so you can listen twice as much as you speak.”

Continuous talkers do not hear what others have to say and thus open the door to much misunderstanding. Continues talkers often degenerate into fierce controversialists. Plus, when we are talking all the time we have a much harder time hearing what God has to say. **Verse 21:**

**21**Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Here’s the key to being someone who is under control: “humbly accept the word planted in you.” Scholars say that the word translated as “filth” is the word you would use to describe wax in the ears. So James is still talking about listening. He’s saying we need to get rid of the things that make it hard to hear God’s Word. That includes anger, as well as other immoral and evil things.

And notice two things about this word: For one thing, it is already implanted in you. James is talking to people who are already believers. And he’s bringing us back, here, to the verse that snagged in my mind last week, verse 18, which says that we have been given “new birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” The idea is that we are saved by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The word being planted in us.

But the other thing he says is that we must “accept the word.” That is to say, hearing the word is not just a one time thing. It’s not like we receive the gospel, we believe in Jesus, we say a sinner’s prayer, and that’s the total of our Christian life. Rather, James is saying now that it is planted within us we need to continue to accept it, we need to continue to learn and listen and nourish the fruit God’s Word wants to create in our lives.

***Mirror Time***
Which leads us into the second characteristic of authentic Christians: **Authentic Christians are people of conviction.** True followers of Christ don’t just pay lip-service to God’s Word, they live it out. **Verse 22:**

**22**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

A person of conviction is someone who sincerely believes something; and you can see their sincerity in the fact that they live their lives according to their beliefs.

One of the things Jesus took the Pharisess and other religious officials of his day to task for was that they were constantly paying lip-service to God; without really honoring Him with their lives. He declared that their worship was in vain. He said they honored God with their talk, but their hearts were in fact far from Him. (Mark 7:6) They did not really live out their convictions.

It’s possible to be somebody who wears a Dutch façade. You know what that reference means? In Orange City and Pella, where the Tulip Festival is a big deal, they’ve made efforts to make their downtowns look old world. So they have put Dutch fronts on many of their buildings. Brightly colored facades that evoke the Netherlands. But behind these fronts, it’s still just a normal rectangle building like you might see on any other downtown in Iowa.

I’ve heard that metaphor for a lot of church-goers: put on a front, a façade, that looks like all the other church-goers; that goes through all the superficial rituals of attendance on Sunday and dressing the right way and watching your language when you are with certain people; that fits in to the church culture; but underneath life is just as messy and wayward as it can be.

Or, another illustration, and a dated reference. James 1:22 always reminds me of Eddie Haskell. Some of you will remember this. Eddie Haskell was Wally’s best friend on the old sitcom “Leave it to Beaver.” Whenever Eddie was around adults he was the politest kid around. He knew all the right things to say, always gave off the impresion of responsibility beyond his years. But when there were no adults around he was the one who was always instigating trouble, getting the Cleaver boys to do all sorts of disbodedient things. Eddie wasn’t really a person of conviction. His life did not match the façade he presented to others.

James doesn’t want that from us. He wants us to do what the word says. He wants us to live according to our faith. He gives his own illustration in **verses 23-24:**

**23**Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror **24**and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

This is what James means by “deceiving” oneself. He imagines somebody going to a mirror, making a quick check, giving himself the stamp of approval (“looking good”) and then walking away. When, in actuality, the man is a mess. A cowlick here, a piece of spinach in the teeth, a smudge of dirt across the forehead, buttons on the shirt that don’t line up. The whole point of looking in a mirror is to make sure everything is where it should be. But a man who checks the mirror and then forgets about everything that is wrong is simply deceiving himself.

If God’s Word is the mirror that shows us our flaws, then we should be looking at it to see what needs to change. We should be studying it carefully to make sure our lives match up with what we claim to believe. **Verse 25**:

**25**But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

In other words: don’t just listen to the Word, do what it says. Accept the word planted in you and let it bear its fruit.

Soren Kierkegaard once told a story about a make believe country where only ducks lived. One Sunday mornign, all the ducks came into their little duck church, waddled down the aisles, and waddled into the pews. Then the duck preacher came, took his place behind the pulpit, opened the duck Bible and began to preach: “Ducks! You have wings, and with wings you can fly like eagles!”

All the ducks quacked loud AMENs!

The duck pastor continued: “With your wings you can soar into the sky!” Again the ducks responded with AMENs and QUACKs and AFLACs! So the duck pastor said with even greater emphasis: “Ducks, you have wings! YOU CAN FLY!” And all the ducks in the church quacked, AMEN!

And then they all got up from the pews, waddled down the aisles, waddled back to their ponds, and went back to swimming.

How about us? Do we really live out of our convictions? Are we known as people who show how firmly we hold our Christian beliefs by putting our faith into action; or do we just waddle through life like everyone else on the planet?

***True Religion***Which leads to the third thing James has to say about authentic Christianity: **Authentic Christians are people of compassion**. True followers of Christ show their faith by looking out for others. **Verses 26 and 27:**

**26**Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. **27**Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Verse 26 takes back to watching our patterns of speech. As I said, taming the tongue is very important in James. We’ll talk more about that in a couple of weeks.

The other thing to notice in verse 26, and the beginning of verse 27, is the use of the word “religion.” Maybe you have heard somebody say that “Christianity is not a religion, it’s a relationship.” If you have heard that, the speaker was probably trying to get at the point that a lot of religions are about following the rules. A lot of religions are about going through certain rituals and fulfilling certain obligation. The expression “Christianity is not a religion, it’s a relationship” means that Jesus doesn’t want us just going through the motions. He is much more interested in a relationship with us than seeing how many hoops we can jump through.

And really, the sentiment behind that phrase is exactly what James is getting at in this passage. James doesn’t want us merely paying lip-service to God, performing superficial rituals without being authentically changed. Bad religion, worthless religion, is the kind of religion which allows us to hide behind Dutch facades.

If that’s the way you’ve come to think of religion, don’t let James’s use of the word confuse you. He’s agains that kind of religion as well. But true religon, the kind of religious observance that the Father accepts as pure and faultless, is authentic. It gives evidence that it is real.

And the evidence James points to in verse 27 is of two kinds: 1) looking after orphans and widows in their distress; and 2) keeping onself from being polluted by the world.

This is important, because so many Christians fall off the horse on one side or the other. What I mean by that, is some brands of Christianity are very much focused on the second part: don’t be polluted by the world. Sexual purity is what matters. Observing propriety with language—no cussing and that sort of thing. Financial integrity. Some brands of Christianity are very focused on being different from the world, but where they fall off the horse is they are not very good at matters practical compassion for the poor and helpless.

But there are other brands of Christianity who fall off the horse the other way. They can be very good at matters of social justice and compassion and helping people: but as far as their lifestyles they end up being very permissive and not very distinnguishable from the rest of the world. Sometimes we see this in young-adult Christians: very idealistic about making changes in the world; but very casual about sexual relationships or drug use.

James says, in verse 27, that pure and undefiled religion - true faith in Jesus Christ the Lord - stays on the horse. It visits “orphans and widows in their distress” and it “keeps oneself unstained by the world." Not either/or, but both/and. Social justice and personal piety. Public compassion and private purity. Proactive steps of kindness and protective vigilance against defiling sin.

And for us, since our brand of Christianity has a tendency to emphasize personal holiness over active service, let’s think for a couple of minutes about acts of compassion.

That’s what James means, by the way, when he talks about widows and orphans. In that culture, to be an unattached woman was to be vulnerable. There were few economic opportunities available to a single woman, and little financial secuity. In the same way, orphans were dependent on the kindness of strangers, or confined to a life on the streets. James does not mean that authentic Christains only look after widows and religon—though that same group is vulnerable today—but that Christians have compassion on everyone that is in need. Everyone who is in distress.

For James, this is the ultimate test of your Christianity. This is what it means to do what the Word says. He means putting your money where your mouth is. He means sacrificing for the good of others. He means inconveniencing yourself to benefit someone else. This is the good Samaritan going out of his way to help the beaten traveller. This is the leaders of the early church making sure there was enough food for the foreign widows in Acts 6. This is Jesus having compassion on the hungry crowds and feeding them from the fish and loaves.

In the early days of Christianity, the Roman Empire didn’t know what to do with this new religion. At best they were indifferent to it; at worst they felt threatened by it. Afterall, it was a religion built around a man the Empire had crucified as a criminal. More than that, these new Christ-followers refused to worship the Caesars as gods. Over the years, there were a variety of persecutions and efforts to stamp Christianity out.

But there was this one thing about the Christians that the Emperors could not ignore: they really practiced what they preached. This was especially true when plagues came through the land from time to time.

Without an understanding of germ theory or antibiotics or much knowledge of how disease was spread, the most common response when plague hit a city was to get out of the city as fast as possible. People often pushed sufferers away, fled from their family members who were infected, and left the dead and dying as unburied corpses in the desire to save themselves. But Christians were different. When everybody else was fleeing, Christians waded in. Thy served as nurses for the sick. They took care of the dead and dying. At great risk to themselves, they stayed and cared for those in need.

And those watching could not deny that they were really living out their faith. Julian, a fourth century Emperor who truly hated Christianity and wanted to see it eradicated, nonetheless recognized that Christians were practicing true compassion. He wrote: “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well. Every one can see that our people lack aid from us.” (quoted in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 84)

That’s the kind of true religion James was talking about. That’s the difference between paying lip-service to the Word and really doing what it says.

The person whose relationship withJesus is authentic will put spiritual truth into practice. That person’s life will be marked by self-control, depth of conviction, and love for others. That’s the difference between fake Christianity and the real thing.