

# **This is Dedicated to the One I Love**

**“Dedicate your living.”**

**James 1:19-27**

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## **True Christians**

I have now had pneumonia twice. The first time was a long time ago: a few months out of seminary, a few months into marriage, and a few months working in a Kalamazoo church as an associate pastor: still learning who I was and what I was to do.

Pneumonia: I was given strict orders then. I was confined to our apartment for two full weeks, essentially in bed. No driving, no walks outdoors, and no work. Laura was away all day every day student teaching. Long hours alone...left alone to my own devises.

So I read a book: *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language*, by the German scholar Gerhard Ebeling. It was one of the hardest books I ever read; and I absorbed it...then translated it all into the next sermon I preached after I got well.

A 45 minute dissertation on the first chapter of John: “In the beginning was the Word.”

You may have just looked at your watch. It’s okay. You’re off the hook. The bout of pneumonia I’ve had the past week has only had me home-bound for several days; I read absolutely no theology; and the program staff took pains to time out each part of our worship service: seventeen minutes for the sermon.

Don’t worry.

The notable thing about the 45 minute sermon was not the fact that it would have served better as a lecture for a grad school class than a church, or that a young pastor lacked skill in timing sermons. What was notable was the response I found in the people who were victim to it.

I heard nothing about burnt chickens in ovens. No complaints. When I apologized to my senior pastor whose job was to evaluate me, he said that when you have

something to say, it's always a good idea to say it – like it was more important to build up confidence in a young preacher than to get picky...this time.

Here was their perfect chance to, well, be angry with me; and instead they were being gentle. They said things like, "It was so good to have you back;" and, "I'm glad you're feeling better." Even, "You gave us a lot to chew on."

They were really being...Christian. 'You know what I mean? That day, I think I learned more from them about *theological practice* than they could have learned from me about *theological theories*.

### **The Integrating Rule**

Some people, it's said, *talk the talk but don't walk the walk*. There's a difference, a big difference, between knowing something, *believing it*, even talking about it – and *doing it*.

I knew a guy in school who was just like everybody else. He studied hard, sometimes, and sometimes sloughed off; did well with his classes; went to chapel services once-in-a-while but mostly didn't; hung out; had a sense of humor; was moderately reserved. He was a normal guy.

Once we graduated, Bruce and I went on to serve in different annual conferences. Years later our paths crossed paths with him again, a year or so before he was elected bishop. He came to West Michigan to lead a workshop on spirituality for a group I was in, so I got a chance to figure out the kind of person he had become.

Really, in a lot of ways Bruce was still Bruce. A nice guy who was approachable and good-natured: he had many of the same mannerisms, same laugh, and the same wit. But, I thought, something also changed. He seemed to carry a sense of peace and a wisdom, like he had been places that helped him pull it all together.

I tried to figure out a word for this new thing I noticed in him.

*Integrity*. That was it. He had an *integrity* that was more than moral uprightness. It was more a *strength of oneness* – like he had taken the beliefs, the theological theories, and blended them together with his actions and his manner of relating to others. It was all integrated in his living: bound together as one.

Isn't that what a matured Christian is supposed to look like? Someone who believes the Bible's description of Jesus shows both what God is like and what he and she can be like...and then actually lives like that, too.

Believe it...*and* do it...integrated.

How do you do that? How do you be like Bruce? More important, how do you actually be like Jesus?

This is the question that's tackled through the whole Book of James in the Bible. The Reformer Martin Luther said that the book was "the Straw Gospel" because it never mentioned Jesus. The architect of the Methodist movement John Wesley said that the point was that James is important because it assumes Jesus and tells us how to be like Jesus.

It's kind of a brief instruction manual on how to take this belief in God you find in the life and death of Jesus and make it an authentic faith.

Faith with integrity.

I want to paraphrase the way James begins.

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...rid yourselves of sleaze and growing evil. Welcome with meekness (that is, *without arrogance*) the implanted Word...

Be doers of that Word, not merely hearers. Get your standards by concentrating on God's standards; not by looking at yourself and thinking that you are the measurement of what is right.

If you think that you're religious – that is, really spiritual – but don't control what you say and create your own reality to suit your own agenda, you're wasting your time.

The kind of faith that is worth having is this: get absorbed in caring for those who are in need of help as God cares for creation.<sup>1</sup>

Talk the talk. Walk the walk. This is how to look and feel like a Christian as well as sound like one.

The reason Martin Luther didn't care for the Book of James, besides never mentioning Jesus by name, was that Luther thought James was saying it doesn't matter what you believe. It only matters what you do. Then if that were so, all you'd need to do is accomplish a list of good works in your life and you'd save yourself. You wouldn't

need the Cross. You wouldn't need Jesus. You wouldn't need God. All you'd need is yourself.

That's a good warning. Don't reach that conclusion from what James says.

In the Christian walk there is no walk without the talk. There is no living without the new life that is given.

So this is where we begin:

with the life-giving word of God's love; the necessary practice of living that shows it; and something that brings belief and practice together, blends them, so one is like the other and the other is like the one.

Integrity.

A couple years ago our congregation studied a little book that happens to have been written by Bruce's principle mentor, *Three Simple Rules*.<sup>2</sup> It's a study based on Wesley's *General Rules of the Methodist Church*.

- Do no harm
- Do Good
- Stay in love with God

Our membership classes still do this study as a discipline of spiritual education while they learn about our faith and church. The group we've received today was discussing the lesson last week when I asked them, "What occurred to you when you were reading these lessons?"

This is what one of our new members said: "Each of the rules seems obvious, simple to grasp but hard to do. The first two, 'Do no harm' and 'Do good,' seem like they aren't connected until you get to the third. 'Stay in love with God' is necessary for the other two to work. If you do that they all pull together. If you don't get that, they all fall apart."

Maybe that's what Bruce had come to understand. Maybe that's what Bruce had come to practice.

Life disciplined by an intentional rhythm of keeping with God.

Like an old couple whose love is stronger now than early courtship sustaining and nurturing their bond through the regular pulse of dates and conversations, walks in the woods and adventures away...

The one who stays in love with God grows in love through time spent in prayer and presence with the One who gave her, gave him life.

Faith can come as fire when it hits. But what is to sustain it other than serious attention?

And what good is it, unless you let it permeate everything in your life: mending inner divisions; making peace in your heart; moving you forward with certain purpose?

Talking the talk. Walking the walk. Integrated by the love of God.

### **Time's Up**

Seventeen minutes.

Times up.

Maybe it would be a good idea for me to do what I said.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Letter of James," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* vol. XII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1998. p 189.

<sup>2</sup> Rueben Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*. Mexico: Abingdon Press. © 2007.