October 2/3, 2010

Remove the Masks

Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

James 1:19-27

Pastor Bryan Clark

A couple of days ago Patty and I were going somewhere and there was a little boy playing out in his yard and he had a full costume on, like a super hero. He had a cape and he had a mask and I heard Patty just kind of quietly say, "Oh that's so cute". We all remember days when we were kids and we wore the costumes and we wore the masks and, in those days it was all kind of funny; it was all kind of cute. But wearing masks as adults is not very cute is it? It's not really very funny. We sing these great hymns of faith but often do so wearing our masks. When we took the survey, sixty per cent of you said, "I feel like I need to hide". What are we hiding from? What's the secret? Why the mask? And what is it we need to know that will allow us to take off the masks and just be honest? "This is me."

That is what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to James, Chapter 1. Some would say that James is kind of a hodge podge of topics; it just kind of jumps from here to there. I would disagree with that. I think there's actually a train of thought—a flow—and each week we will do the best we can to kind of connect the dots. Verses 1-12 were about trials, verses 12-18 about temptation. The common thread was the *word of truth*. If you're going to endure trials and persevere, you have to believe that God tells the truth. If you're going to resist temptation, you have to believe that everything that is good and everything that is right comes from God. In verse 18 we are reminded that we have been *rebirthed*. It's likely James got that language from Jesus himself, that we have been born again and we have been rebirthed. How? By the *Word of Truth*. When the world was lying to us, God told the truth and, through that truth, we have been reborn. In order that what? In order that we might be the first fruit of His new creation, that would resemble in some way God's redemptive story, that people could look at us and say: This is just a glimpse; this is just the first fruit of what I'm doing—of the new creation—that God's story is that He is going to redeem all creation back to Himself. And this is just a glimpse of what life looks like lived under the reign of the goodness of God. How do we do that? How do we live out that mission to rightly represent new creation? Verse 19:

> **This you know, my beloved brethren.** [That's actually a little bit mild. The text is really, "Know this!" It's rather strong.] **Know this my brethren. Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger;** (*NASB, James 1:19)

In talking about the word of truth—thinking about it like a seed that is planted in the soil—there must be the proper growing conditions. These three statements reflect the proper growing conditions: **Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.** This is not a reflection of a kind of social gathering. Those of us that are introverts would jump on this. **Be slow to speak.** See, we're not defective; we're just biblical.(Laughter) But it has nothing to do with that; it has nothing to do with how you conduct yourself in social settings. It's specifically related to teach-ability. Again, remembering in the first century people didn't read the text; they had the text read to them. So the idea of being**...quick to hear...**would be quick to hear what God has to say—quick to listen to God. So you kind of have this two-sided coin. In order to be **quick to hear,** you have to be **slow to speak**. By the time James was writing, there was very little of the New Testament out there and so

it was likely that when the community of faith gathered, there were a lot of opinions about what the truth was. As a matter of fact we get a little farther into James and we find out, that is indeed a problem. So part of what he is saying here is, "Be slow to speak; be slow to say, 'Thus sayeth the Lord' and be quicker to listen to what God has to say." The heart of this is going to the idea of being teachable, of recognizing that I have to have a heart that is soft and humble and teachable, whether God is speaking to me through His Word or whether God is speaking to me through a friend who is trying to speak into my life. When I get defensive, when I deflect, when I get angry, I'm not **quick to hear**. I'm way too **quick to speak** and I create an environment where I'm not continuing to learn and grow. Part of what I have to understand is: Hey I'm not there yet. I'm not finished yet. I have a lot to learn and I make a lot of mistakes. I really need to hear what God has to say, whether it comes through a friend who loves me, or whether it comes through God's Word. I need to be teachable, to continue to grow. That's the heartbeat of what he's saying here. **Be quick to hear and slow to speak and slow to anger.** Why?

...because the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God. (Vs. 20)

The **righteousness of God** is not really talking about meeting a standard. The language is an active language, maybe better translated: *because the anger of man does not lead to righteous living*. That's really what the text is saying. Nothing good comes from anger. Anger shuts me down. Anger makes me unteachable. Anger makes me so I don't listen. Anger makes me way too quick to talk and way too slow to listen. One of the things that continues to strike me about our culture is how very angry we are. It is everywhere. Everybody seems angry. The political scene is so filled with anger. The media is angry. Teachers put up with angry parents. Retailers put up with angry customers. Everybody is angry. It is anger in the market place. It's anger in our churches. It's anger in our homes. If you don't believe that, go stand at the check-out line and watch. This summer Patty and I went down to Worlds of Fun for a day and we were sitting on a bench just watching people and we were appalled at how angry parents are with their children. They are grabbing them; they are shaking them; they are jerking at them and you say, "Wow! a hundred dollars just to be angry? What's up with that?" I mean there is just so much anger.

We have to understand that anger is bad. Now as soon as I say that, somebody is going to say, "Hey wait a minute. When I read through the gospels, Jesus got angry." I realize that. Jesus also walked on the water! I don't do that either! (Laughter) It's true; there is such a thing called righteous indignation— righteous anger—which in essence is saying that my anger is so right, so devoid of self, so in alignment with the righteousness of God, that God is pleased with my anger. The number of times in your lifetime that your anger is so in tune with God and so devoid of self—it is so immeasurable, there's no point of going there. That's not a loophole. Anger is bad! It's too easy to justify that, "In my case my anger is okay; it's justified; it's excusable; it's rationalized. In my case it's okay." Well God says it's not okay, because your anger never leads to **the righteousness of God**. Nothing good ever comes of anger. You never accomplish anything of consequence when you're angry. It shuts you down. You stop listening; you stop growing; you stop moving forward; you hurt the people around you; you begin to destroy yourself. Anger is bad because it does not accomplish the righteousness of God. The proper soil conditions are: **be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.** Verse 21:

Therefore...

The **therefore** is rolling out of this statement: The **anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God** and, if that's true,

Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness... (Vs. 21a)

The phrase **putting aside** is actually a clothing metaphor—taking off the dirty clothes. If I am going to really represent new creation—the redemption to come—then I have to take off the old dirty clothing. Filthiness carries the idea of moral filthiness, moral impurity. Whatever's in my life that is displeasing to God—that's offensive to God—that's dirty clothing that has no place in rightly representing who I am as new creation. It's got to come off.

The translation **wickedness** I think is a little misleading. The Greek word is *mean-spiritedness*. I think it is tying back to the idea of anger, saying that we should take off the dirty clothing of immorality; we should also take off the dirty clothing of mean-spiritedness. You get a sense that these scattered Jewish believers had a lot of conflict—had a lot of intensity—between them, and James is trying to deal with that and he's saying, "*As this new creation there should be no immorality and there should be no mean-spiritedness between one another*." What's the alternative?

Laying aside all filthiness and all remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted... (Vs. 21b)

With **humility**—with brokenness. Humility would capture this idea that, "Hey I need to learn; I need to grow; I need to listen. I need to listen to what God has to say, whether that is through His Word or through someone else speaking into my life." Humility is not defensive. Humility does not get angry. Humility does not react and deflect. Humility listens because, at the core, there's ascension. I know I need to change; I know I need to grow; I know I need to be different; I'm not finished yet. I know that. **In humility, receive the word implanted**. The word **implanted** is an agricultural term. It basically means that the seed is planted within me. It doesn't just kind of blow by but, like a seed that is very carefully planted in the soil, it roots and it begins to grow and bear fruit. Why is this so important?

...which is able to save your souls. (Vs. 21c)

Now what does he mean by that? Whenever we see this **save your soul** kind of language, we tend to define it really narrowly and rigidly. But again, understand the New Testament talks about salvation in past, present, and future terms. It isn't always a reference to whether or not I've trusted Christ as Savior. It's saving me from the destruction of my anger. It's saving me from being unteachable. It's saving me from disastrous choices. It's saving me from the despair and the destruction if I don't listen to God. So the seed that's implanted in me is going to save me from myself. It's going to save me from making a mess of my life. It's going to save me from hurting the people around me. Verse 22:

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

There's a huge difference between a **doer** and a **hearer** only. Interesting phrase—**hearers only who delude themselves**. In other words, hearers only *think* they're spiritual. They think they have it wired. They think they have it all together but they're deluded because they have a head full of knowledge—a head full of Bible information. Because they could get a 100% on the Bible test, they think that makes them spiritual. Over the years I've known many people that have a head full of knowledge but they're not teachable. They're angry; they're not humble; they're arrogant and

they're not spiritual in the slightest. Just because you have a head full of knowledge guarantees you nothing. You must be a **doer of the word, not a hearer only.** James then has an illustration of a hearer: Verse 23:

> **For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.** (Vs. 23-24)

One who is a hearer only is **like a man who looks at his face in the mirror**. The word that is used there means a good, careful, intentional look. But once he goes out, he becomes someone else. He wears a mask; he hides; he pretends. He's somebody other than that person that was in the mirror. But I think there's a deeper, richer, theological meaning to this.

There are a couple of words at the end of that verse that are somewhat troubling and need to be rethought a little bit. When he says **he immediately has forgotten what kind of person he was**—what *kind* person he *was*—those two words make us think there's a deeper meaning here. If I'm talking about somebody who has looked in the mirror and has walked away, the language I would expect is he has forgotten what he *looks like*, not **what kind of person**—and then past tense—**he was**. What kind of person he is?

So what's going on here? I think the answer is found by looking at the Greek word for **...he looks at his natural face in the mirror.** It's actually a word that means his *face of origin*. I think what the text is saying is that, when we look in the mirror, we see our face of origin. In other words it's referencing that we see the image of God. We see the fact that we, as people, are made in the image of God. That's our *face of origin*. That's what God has always wanted. When we look in the mirror we see that we're not like the rest of creation. We are different. David described it as *crowned with glory and majesty*. There's something about us that is unique, that reflects the glory of God. There's an image that is still there that reminds us that this world is not what God wanted. This is not God's dream. This was not God's vision for you. God's vision for you is not that you would settle for the things of this world, not that you would settle for the cheap substitutes of this world, not that you would be stained by the things of this world that only break your heart. This is not God's vision.

The idea of hiding, of putting on a mask—the idea of pretending—that's not what God wanted. That was never God's dream for people made in the image of God. When I look in the mirror, there's a brief moment where I see the image and get some sense that God has always wanted something more for me than this. But then immediately I step away and I put on a mask and I settle for the stuff of this world. I settle for the stuff that contaminates me. I settle for the cheap substitutes that dissatisfy me. I settle for that which breaks my heart and, in a sense, I am wearing a mask and I am hiding the glory of the image. What's the alternative? Verse 25:

> **But one who looks intently...**

That word **intently** was the word that was used to describe Peter on the resurrection morning when he went into the empty tomb and looked to see if Jesus was there. It's a very strong term!

> **But the one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty...** (Vs. 25a)

Now what is the **law of liberty**? There's no question that this is talking about the Old Testament story —the Old Covenant story—that is fulfilled in the person of the Messiah. The liberty—the freedom of the law—only comes when the law is fulfilled in the person of Christ. It's verse 18: the gospel of truth that rebirthed us. So, in essence, what James is saying is that the redemptive story has been unfolding and was brought to its fullness when God became flesh and the Messiah died on the cross for our sins. That has made it possible to be set free to experience the **liberty** that God has always wanted, to begin this journey, to restore again the image and the glory of what God has always wanted for people made in His image. When we look into the **perfect law of liberty,** this is the mirror that reveals the glory of what God has always wanted for me. When I get the sense of mercy and grace, I begin to get the sense of freedom. I don't have to pretend. I don't have to wear a mask. It doesn't have to be this way. He says he looks into

> **...the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it,** (believes it, embraces it, lives it) **not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.** (Vs. 25)

The word **blessed** is our word from verse 12. It means to be deeply, deeply happy. This person will experience the joy, the fullness of joy, the deep, rich happiness that God intended in order to be the first fruit, to be a glimpse of the new creation, to be a witness to this world—that this is what life looks like lived under the reign of the goodness of God. There has to be a view into the mirror of God's Word and to the perfect law of liberty and then get this magnificent picture of God's mercy and grace. And, as I understand God's mercy and grace, I start to understand that this is not on the basis of my performance. This is not on the basis of what I must do to impress God. This is an invitation to bring my stuff, to bring my failures, to bring my sins, to bring my struggles, to bring my disappointments, to bring my secrets and to lay them at the foot of the cross, and say, "God, here I am."

The gathering of the church is never a gathering of the self-righteous. It's a gathering of sinners and misfits and losers who say, "God, I need help. Without you, I have no hope. So here it is. I've dumped the whole load at the foot of the cross." And what you find is God responds with mercy and grace and is making you into something that is absolutely magnificent, that is making you into a masterpiece of His grace. When I understand and I finally realize, "Hey, I don't have to pretend; I don't have to wear a mask; I don't have to hide. Grace and mercy say it's okay to be me. This is me, such as I am," — which is the first step in experiencing brokenness, which is the first step in experiencing the wave of the grace and mercy of Jesus that will set me free.

James, ever the pragmatist, ends with kind of this three-point check list. There were obviously those that he was writing to that thought they had this thing wired. They weren't very teachable—sounds like they were very rigid. They were mean-spirited so James is going to talk to them. Verses 26 and 27:

> **If anyone thinks himself to be religious...**

Now I use the word **religion** a lot and what I always mean by that is *man's way to God*. I would say the gospel is God's way to us. Religion is man's way to God. It's our way to try to make ourselves acceptable to God. This word *religious* is very unusual. It only shows up a couple of times in the New Testament, and it basically means *someone who is zealous for the rights and the ceremonies of religion.* This was very early on in the movement of the church. You would have to imagine that these Jewish believers were still very legalistic toward the Old Testament Law and

towards certain rules and regulations. Every "i" had to be dotted and every "t" had to be crossed. It sounds like they were probably fighting about that, over *Who's right*? and *Who's wrong?*. So what he's saying here is: If anyone thinks himself to be religious—if you really think you've got it—all right, let's check it out.

> **If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless.** (Vs. 26)

Well that's getting right to the point, isn't it? Just in case you didn't get it, I'll put it in a little clearer language. Anyone who cannot control his or her mouth—I don't know what you have, but whatever you have—it's pretty worthless, because your mouth is in no way rightly resembling new creation and the life of Christ. Now when he's talking about mouth, that includes e-mail; that includes texting; that includes Facebook; that includes cell phones and that includes what comes out of my mouth. Anything I communicate any way, if it does not reflect the love and the kindness of Jesus, if it is hurtful, if it is mean-spirited, if it is angry—whatever you have—it's pretty worthless because it in no way reflects the new life of Christ, if you cannot control your mouth. Verse 27:

> **Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father...** [pure and undefiled religion – in other words what he is saying now, is "Okay, you think you got the right stuff?" Here it is:] **to visit orphans and widow in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.**

In the first century orphans and widows would have been the most vulnerable and the most needy. They didn't have a lot of social programs, especially for these dispersed Jews. If they didn't care for the weak and the vulnerable among them, they would simply die. So what James is saying is, "Hey, you can talk all you want; you can have all this Bible knowledge; you can be a big shot but, at the end of the day, if you aren't caring for the people that need help, whatever you have isn't worth much." Now we could define the orphans and widows among us probably a hundred different ways in our culture. It's those that are weak; it's those that are vulnerable, those that are the rejects, those that need us to reach out and love them with very little chance that they can give much back—those that society has rejected. Whoever you want to put in that category, the heartbeat of what James is saying is, "*If what you have is real and it's going to rightly reflect new creation in Christ, you genuinely care about people, especially those that are weak and vulnerable and needy among us."* Every day isn't about me and my needs and my hopes and my dreams. Every day isn't about me climbing the ladder and trying to be somebody, but the heartbeat of life is about reaching out and helping people around me that need help and **to remain unstained from the world.**

Simply stated it is to walk in moral purity—that I am **unstained** by that which is offensive to God. If there is anything in my behavior that's offensive to God, then it needs to go. Whatever I have, it isn't worth much if it doesn't translate into right living. James is saying, "If you really have the real deal, then you should get control of your mouth. You should genuinely care about people around you, especially those who are the most weak and the most vulnerable and you should live a life that is free from that which offends God."

In every church, whether it's a mega church or it's a house church, or whether it's anything between, people walk through the doors wearing their masks. It happens in every single church—people putting on their church face, trying to pretend they're one thing but they've got secrets. They've got things that they want to keep hidden. They're pretending to be

somebody they really aren't. The first thing that Adam and Eve did, when they sinned against God, is what? They hid. I'll guarantee you that, if there'd been a mask in that garden, they would have been wearing it. They hid!

That's the reaction of sin. It makes us want to hide; it makes us want to pretend. Sadly we wear masks when we gather as the community of faith, because we still don't get *grace*. We still think this is about performance. We still think this is about measuring up. We still think this is about promoting some sort of an image—and so we wear masks. We pretend. The one place on this earth where it should be safe to just be me, should be this environment of grace, a place where the mask can come off and say, "Hey this is me; it's not very pretty but, honestly, this is me." Prayerfully ask yourself, "What is it that I'm hiding? What is my secret? Why am I pretending? Why do I feel the need to wear a mask?" Understand that until, in brokenness, I lay my stuff, my secrets, my heartaches at the foot of the cross and I say, "Hey, this is me; this is me," it's only then I begin to experience the flood of God's grace and mercy where He responds by saying, "On the basis of My grace and mercy, I am making you into something magnificent!" This has never been about your ability to perform. It's never been about your ability to measure up. It's always been about His grace and mercy and He responds when we've come before Him in honesty by saying, "I don't know how this world views you but I want you to know I think you're awesome and when I'm done with you, you will be absolutely magnificent!"

So what's the secret? What are you hiding? What's behind the mask? All of you, when you came in this morning, were handed a mask. If you don't have one, the ushers can get you one. We would ask you to prayerfully consider, what is it that I am trying to hide? Why the mask? Why am I pretending? Whatever it is, take a pen and write it on the mask. You can take some time to do this, but write whatever it is, whatever your secret is, whatever you're hiding, write it on the mask and then discard the mask. You can bring them down here or just drop them in the aisle. It's symbolic of the fact that I am not going to hide anymore. I'm not going to wear these masks. I'm going to come before God and the world and say, "Hey, this is me; this is me—such as I am—and, in my brokenness, bring my stuff to the foot of the cross," and there begin to experience the flow of God's grace and mercy. But the first step is to say, "Hey the masks are coming off." Let's take a few minutes to think about it and to pray about it. Write it on your masks. We want to litter this place with the masks that are coming off. As soon as you have discarded your mask, you are free to go.

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Opening Discussion

1. What do you think of when you think of people wearing a mask? What feelings do masks stir up for you? Why?

2. Metaphorically speaking, why do people in our culture today wear masks? Why do Christians specifically wear masks? Why do we feel the need to hide or pretend to be something we're not?

3. Do you ever wear a mask?

Bible Study

1. Read James 1:19, 20. Review the importance of the Word of truth as it relates to trials (1:1-12) and temptations (1:12-18). What did the Word of truth do for us according to 1:18?

2. What does it mean in this context to be quick to hear? What does it mean to be slow to speak?

3. What does James say about anger? How is it inconsistent with the purpose of our new birth? If we are to give the world a glimpse of life lived under the goodness of God where is the anger coming from?

4. Read 1:21-25. What does it mean to "in humility receive the word implanted?"

5. What is the difference between a hearer and a doer? In what way is a "hearer only" a person who wears a mask?
6. The literal translation is "a person who looks at his face of origin in a mirror." James could be referring to the fact that we are made in God's image yet we settle for so much less than what He

intended for us. Relate this to Adam and Eve and their behavior after the fall. Why are they hiding and why do we hide?

7. What is the alternative to the mask according to 1:25? What do we see when we look intently into the Word of truth as it relates to who we are in Christ?

8. Read 1:26-27. What should characterize a true follower of Jesus, one who genuinely allows people to get a glimpse of life lived under the goodness of God (1:18)?

Application

1. Do you wear masks? Do you hide or have secrets? What have you learned from this text that will help you discard the masks?

2. What would it mean for you to discard the mask and show the real you? What is behind the mask according to the perfect law of liberty?

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