

**Redeeming Religion**  
**James 1:22-27**  
**June 23/24, 2012**

**[adoption video]**

(No babies' cheeks were harmed in the making of that video.)

If there is one thing I've learned in my time at the Summit Church, it's that our media team can take a really messy, ugly video shoot and somehow pull it together to make it look like a work of art. When we shot that last week, I couldn't string two sentences together, we had a little girl who did *not* want to cooperate with the camera and who broke out in a rash around her pretty little eyes the day before the shoot, and during those scenes at the park it was about 140 degrees. So when you can show a video that was shot in hot and humid weather and not show pit stains and still make a little girl look adorable even when she feels lousy and is on antibiotics, you're not a media team...you're a magicians team.

My name is Danny Franks and I'm the Connections Pastor here at the Summit. If you've ever wondered what a Connections Pastor does, well here's your definition: he's the guy who preaches when you bring a friend to hear the real pastor.

Pastor J.D. is away this weekend, obviously. As you know we have short term teams that we send out all year long to work with our church planters around the globe as well as on special mission projects here in the states. This weekend J.D. is spending a few days with some of our college students who are on a summer project in Florida. Yes, tough job, but somebody's got to do it. I always get assigned to hang out with our mission teams who go to Mebane. No offense if you're from Mebane, but it ain't no Sunshine State.

Well this weekend we are taking a brief break from our series out of the book of Hebrews, but if you already opened your Bible or your app to Hebrews I'll make things easy for you. Fast forward a few pages to James chapter 1. Today we are going to be talking about...wait for it...adoption. Just in case you weren't paying attention during the video.

But today's message is about more than just adoption. This is not simply an opportunity to show you moving videos of my family. We're not just talking about adoption, because if we were I could have saved a lot of time on sermon prep this week and just showed you pictures of sad kids who need a home while a Sarah MacLachlan song plays in the background and you get out your checkbook. No, today's message reveals something to us that, for many of us will be surprising. It will be challenging. And it will be awesome.

Today's message is part of my family's journey over the past couple of years. A journey that - yes - culminated in the adoption of our daughter, but it didn't begin there and it hasn't ended there. Some of you, especially those of you at our Brier Creek campus, have been here long enough that you remember when we announced the news of our adoption last fall. To say that the last year has been a life-changing one for our family is a crazy understatement. We have learned more about the gospel, about ourselves, and about the nature of caring for others than we ever thought possible. It's like the adoption of our daughter has served as our own personal laboratory of learning. As a father, I have witnessed this passage of scripture work itself out in our family. As a pastor, I believe that this is about as clear as God's will gets for the people of God.

If you're new to the Bible, this book of James was written by a guy named James. Thank you, seminary degree. But this particular James was the half brother of Jesus...the same Jesus who had himself been adopted by his earthly father, which may color how you see this as we read it.

James has spent the first 21 verses of this book talking about what a real relationship with Jesus Christ looks like. Not the brother-to-brother kind of relationship with Jesus where he was always asking him to turn his juice box into wine when they were kids, but the relationship with Jesus as savior. What faith in Jesus looks like and how it informs the life of a believer. He's likely writing to a particular group of churches that likely are dealing with conflict and infighting among themselves. The whole point of this letter is that our faith is always going to be evidenced by our action.

So there's your background. Here's what James says in 1:22...

*22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

*23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.*

*25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*

*26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

Here's the dilemma James poses for us in the first three verses: there are a lot of people that hear the word of God. There are a lot of people who sit in

sermons and do Bible studies and attend small groups and go to seminars and gain piles upon piles of knowledge about what God's word says and what we're supposed to do. But James' point is that **1. Hearing without doing leads to despair and deception.**

James uses the illustration of the mirror. He says that hearing without doing is like checking yourself out before a big presentation. We have a mirror backstage. Just before I come onstage every weekend, I give myself a once over in that mirror? Why? Because I'm incredibly vain.

But imagine that I looked in that mirror right before coming out and saw that I had a big smear of frosting across my mouth from where I'd just shoved down a Bo Berry biscuit from Bojangles. I mean frosting there and teeth stained blue from those fake blueberries. And instead of *doing* something about it, I just walked out on stage like normal. That would lead to my deception. That's abnormal. When you study an issue, know what needs to be done, but deceive yourself about doing it, it's as if you never saw the mirror to begin with.

Hearing and no action always leads us to despair. **Is there a better picture of the American church?** We pile on this list of do's and never get anything done. When we hear and take action, we're living as we're meant to live...*expressing the grace of Jesus in our lives.* James says that if all we do is talk about our faith but there's no evidence, no visible action, it's worthless and dead. Your mind is playing tricks on you. There's no way a perfectly sane person could see themselves and study themselves for so long, and then just forget. We have to wake up and stop deceiving ourselves; we have to stop being caught up in the religious trap.

But what's the mirror we're supposed to look into? Is it the mirror of what someone else is doing? The mirror that some popular author or celebrity places before us? The mirror that we've created for ourselves? If that's our mirror, we're looking into the wrong thing, because that mirror will always be flawed. It will always be the shattered fun house mirror of our own fallen creation.

Anybody in here like 3D movies? I hate 'em. I can't understand why I'd pay \$3 more per ticket to slap on another pair of glasses and feel like I'm having some sort of out of body experience. I don't know if my eyes aren't lined up right or what, but 3D has never ever felt like an enhanced experience. I have a personal philosophy that the 3D craze of the 1950's is what led to the LSD craze of the 1960's. The 3D glasses were just a gateway drug for hallucinations and fuzzy vision.

***What James calls us to do is to look in the mirror of the gospel.*** It gives us not only a true picture of what we are: broken, sinful, rebellious, unable to change ourselves...but it also gives us a picture of what we've been declared to be: righteous, loved, rescued by Jesus. We're not looking into the mirror of ourselves, we're looking into the mirror of Jesus. But once we truly see Jesus, it's like the illustration J.D. used a couple of weeks back when he talked about being hit by the bus. If you really see Jesus, you're just going to look different. People will *know* that you've seen him. But it becomes a natural reflection rather than a legalistic requirement.

We don't manufacture the thing we're supposed to look like. We naturally reflect the one that created us for a relationship with him, and we reflect him by acting on what we've heard

But what is the catalyst that causes that to happen? Well, James tells us in v. 25:

***25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.***

This is where the surprise twist comes in for many of us. You see, we take great pains here at the Summit to point you not to the law, but to point you to the gospel.

If you were here last week, you know that Pastor Raudel preached on how Jesus came to kill religion, and today I'm preaching on how Jesus' brother tells us to pursue true religion. So the obvious question is, which of your pastors wins this argument, the Latino or the hillbilly? Well, we both do.

Because in this verse, James perfectly marries the law and the gospel and says that it is possible for them to coexist. And all of that happened in Jesus.

In v. 25, the "law" he refers to is the Old Testament law... the 10 commandments and a bunch of other rules and regulations that were passed down to the Hebrews. But he calls it the "perfect law, the law of liberty," which means that when Jesus came, the law was fulfilled in him.

You see, the law by itself does not liberate. It enslaves. The law reminds us that we can never keep the law. Some of you broke 6 out of 10 commandments before you left the house this morning. The law was never meant to stand alone. The law was meant to point forward to Jesus, the only one who could perfectly fulfill it.

That's why James says that we are now looking into the law of liberty. Jesus did something for us that we could never do for ourselves: he fulfilled the law on our behalf. He kept every part of it perfectly. He never sinned, never broke the law, never stood condemned and guilty before God save for when he hung on the cross in our place. But then after he fulfilled it, he gave us the Holy Spirit to transform us not through the law, but through grace.

That's why James' 2<sup>nd</sup> point is **2. Hearing and then doing leads to blessing.**

Again, going back to our series in Hebrews, specifically the message on perseverance: there is a difference between saving faith and superficial faith. Superficial faith hears (and sometimes hears passionately!) but never does anything about it. But there is always a visible, tangible result to go along with saving faith. That's the fruit of the Spirit that Paul talks about in Galatians. It's the "reasonable act of worship" that he talks about in Romans.

There's always the possibility that you'll misunderstand this point. As many times as we've heard this truth, it's important to explicitly state it again: simply "*doing*" *does not save you*. You cannot make yourself acceptable before God by doing anything apart from Jesus. We say all the time, Christianity is not spelled D-O, but D-O-N-E. Because Jesus did everything necessary for us through the cross and resurrection, it's all done, but when we understand what was D-O-N-E, we will D-O, and that action will lead to God's continued blessing on our lives. Too much spelling? Is your brain melting yet?

Matthew 10:8 says that we have been recipients of great grace, we should then give great grace.

But here's the final thing that James says, and it's another surprise twist for those who were reading this for the first time, and maybe a surprise twist for you. Religion is actually a good thing. James tells us that we should pursue religion. But **3. Religion is worthwhile only when it's redeemed and fueled by the Gospel.** That's why this message is called "redeeming religion." Religion doesn't have to stand opposite of a relationship with Jesus. But James says it should be pure. It should be redeemed in light of Jesus. And when religion is pure, it redeems us. (Did you see what I did there?)

Here's how he puts it:

**26** *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* **27** *Religion that is pure*

*and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

So to go back to the Raudel vs. Danny, Latino vs. hillbilly debate, the question is: are we pro-religion or anti-religion? Well, we're anti, as we generally think of religion. Again, religion leads us to work in order to be accepted. This passage helps us understand that because we have been accepted, we will work!

James re emphasizes his point in v. 26. It can mean either that you talk about religion or that you have a foul mouth. But if it means that all you do is talk about it, it ties back to v. 22. If you think you're religious, but all you do is talk and never change, your religion is worthless. Pure religion leads to action. Pure religion that has been redeemed and fueled by the gospel transforms us, and it transforms our world.

James gives one particular action step for what pure religion looks like, and he unpacks that in v. 27. We are to care for who Jesus calls "the least of these," in particular, the widows and the orphans.

In the Bible, you can find over 60 distinct times where the people of God are commanded to care for the orphans, widows, or the outsiders. It began during the time of the Exodus when God commanded the Hebrew nation to take care of those sojourners that crossed their paths. It continued as God established laws and practices for exactly how they should be fed and housed. And when Jesus came, he perfectly exemplified one who reached out to people in greatest need. He embraced the leper, he loved the widow, he brought attention to the plight of the fatherless.

And Jesus' example now becomes our command. That's why I told you at the beginning of this message that I can tell you God's clear will for the people of God: it's to care for those who can give us nothing in return.

You see, I was slow to the adoption game. You heard in the video that my wife Merriem heard the voice of God as it relates to adoption long before I did. She'd mentioned over the years about her desire to possibly adopt, but I put it in the same category as her desire to possibly repaint the kitchen. In other words, I ignored it.

And the reason I ignored it was simply my own selfishness. We had three children who had been potty trained for years and could make their own breakfast and knew pretty much how things ran around our place. I subscribed to the Jim Gaffigan school of thought on adding to the family. He says that if you ever wonder what it's like to go from having three kids

to having four kids, imagine that you're drowning...and somebody throws you a baby.

But the more I read about adoption, the less I could argue with it. The more I heard from other families who had adopted, the more my own selfishness was exposed and the helplessness of the orphan was revealed. That's why I can say I have no doubt that if you're a Christian, you are called to adoption. Your own spiritual adoption already established what you've been called to. You have no choice but to care for the widow and the orphan.

Now let's be fair. What does that look like practically? Not everybody that hears this message is going to adopt. Not everybody that hears this message *should* adopt. But everyone who is a believer has a mandate to care for the least of these. Serving the least of these is not a role Jesus gave our government. It is the role he gave the church.

To quote Tony Merida, I didn't adopt because of sad pictures. I adopted because of theology.

And that means that you take tangible, practical steps. Maybe it does mean you adopt. Maybe it means you start the process of training to be a foster parent or a guardian ad litem. Maybe it means that you financially support a family who is trying to raise thousands of dollars so *they* can adopt. Maybe it means you reach out to the lady across the street who just lost her husband last year.

Again, this happens because we've been adopted ourselves. Jesus left heaven, lived on earth, and adopted us into the family of God. Before we knew we needed a rescuer, Jesus came to rescue us. He gave us his name. He gave us his inheritance. He gave us his identity.

When you adopt a child, it opens the door to some really fun conversations. People want to know your story, the practical part of the process, and how adoption has affected your family. But it also raises some downright goofy questions. I remember shortly after we adopted Haven, I was talking to some well-meaning gentleman, and he said, "So, have you thought about what happens when she gets older? I mean, are you going to tell her she's adopted?" And I just kind of looked at him and said, "Have you seen her? I pray to God that she's smart enough to figure that out. We ain't exactly rocking the same shades of melanin here."

My daughter looks nothing like me physically. She has a different DNA. But she bears my name. I gave her my identity. She will fully share in the inheritance of her brothers (all \$26 of it).

But God bless her, she is beginning to look like us in other ways. She is a Franks in every standard of the term. She has some habits that she picked up from her mama and some she picked up from me. She walks up to these little hand sanitizer dispensers we have all over campus and says “Hands! Hands!” I’m raising a little germaphobe just like me!

*We don’t label her as our “adopted child.” She is “our child.”* She was grafted into our family and outside of skin color you can’t tell where one Franks offspring ends and the other one begins. She’s the little girl. She’s her daddy’s princess. Merriem and I have had to have those talks lately where she tells me, “You know you’re going to have to discipline her at some point.” And of course I will. If she ever knocks over a liquor store we’re going to have a serious conversation.

Our own adoption informs how we relate and react to others. The mirror of the gospel mandates that we take care of the least of these. It’s not a mandate that comes from a simple list of rules, it’s an natural overflow as we look at the Bible to see what Jesus was like and how we can be like him. The nature of the gospel is that we give expecting absolutely nothing in return. As a matter of fact, it is that we give knowing that most of the time we *will not* receive anything in return.

We’re getting close to our annual emphasis on serving our community. We call it ServeRDU and it’s a chance for us as a church to have one concentrated week in partnering with organizations that we serve with all year long. And every year during ServeRDU, the fear of your pastoral team is that our church will view this as a chance for us to do good *to* our community.<sup>1</sup>

Because of our sinful bent, it’s easy to be paternalistic in our response. “There’s a need and I can take care of it. I can paint a wall. I can give some money. I can buy a case of diapers.” It’s easy to view ourselves as a bunch of middle class suburbanites who hop into our SUVs and fan out into the community to pass out gold stars and fairy dust. It’s better to think of ourselves as people who have just been rescued from enemy fire who drop to the ground and crawl back in to save others.

The Christlike response is to incarnate ourselves into the community. We don’t do something *to* the community, we do something *with* the community. We’re not the rescuers! We were imprisoned in our own sin. We are homeless - heaven is our home. We were orphans without him. “They” - the people we serve - are not “them,” “They” are “us.” 2 Corinthians 5 says

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<sup>1</sup> *I’m indebted to our Missions Pastor Curt Alan for this point as well as much of the material regarding ServeRDU.*



that at best, we are simply ambassadors. We've been reconciled, now we've been given the ministry of reconciliation.

*I am not the answer to my little girl's need for a daddy.* At best, all I can do is point her to a perfect heavenly father. Emptying orphanages around the globe is simply social justice if we're not doing it because the cross compels us. Earthly adoption isn't the ultimate answer...heavenly adoption is.

Caring for orphans and widows and the least of these are just examples that point a lost world to the beauty of reconciliation. But without Christ it's short lived and temporary.

You think about the miracles that Jesus performed while he was on earth. Eventually eyes went blind again and wine ran out again, but those things still pointed to something permanent. Caring for orphans and widows does not bring salvation, but it points people to salvation. That's what the unbelieving world said about the Christians.

Spence Shelton, our small groups pastor who is much smarter and much more of a church history nerd than I am, pointed me to a letter written by a 2<sup>nd</sup> century philosopher named Aristides. Note that Aristides was not a Christian, not by a long shot, but he had observed Christians, and this is what he wrote to Emperor Hadrian in 125 AD about the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire:

...they love one another, and from widows they do not turn away their esteem; and they deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. And he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting. And when they see a stranger, they take him in to their homes and rejoice over him as a very brother; for they do not call them brethren after the flesh, but brethren after the spirit and in God.

...there are found in their other writings things which are hard to utter and difficult for one to narrate,-which are not only spoken in words but also wrought out in deeds." (The Apology of Aristides the Philosopher)

In other words, Aristides says, I can't explain it, but I'm sure not going to argue with it!

When people of faith take seriously what Jesus says about caring for others, it causes our society to take notice. But be careful! We're not doing it for society's praise, we should do it because we understand how much Jesus cared for us. There will be times when society misunderstands or even misinterprets how we serve them and they ridicule rather than give thanks. *It doesn't matter! We still have an equal compulsion to do these things.*

This is not social justice or being a better citizen...there is an underlying motivation: the gospel. We love because we have been loved. We serve because we have been served. We humble ourselves because one greater than us humbled himself in his death on the cross.

You also have to be careful that you don't turn this into a checklist. That's why we're not passing out orphans and widows as you leave today. The gospel never gives us a checklist, what it does give us is a litmus test: if we understand how we've been loved as someone who is helpless, we will love others who are helpless.

So what happens now? Well, you start where you are. The reason most of us have never done anything is because we've seen the overwhelming global need rather than seeing the one that's right in front of us. Before God arrested my heart on this issue, I did nothing because when I thought about adoption, I only could see the overwhelming global need. That all changed when I walked into a grandmother's living room here in Durham and locked eyes with one little girl...*my little girl*. God didn't call me or you to eradicate the plight of the fatherless, he called you to take care of the fatherless.

Some studies show that there are a half million kids in foster care in our country today. You might be interested to know that locally, our latest figures show that there are 164 kids in Durham County, 189 kids in Orange County, and 795 in Wake County. But nationwide, half million, out of those 129,000 are on a waiting list to be adopted. There are 400,000 churches in America. If one family in every third church would take seriously the call to adopt, we would - at least temporarily - empty the waiting lists in foster care systems all over the nation. That's not three families per church, not one family per church, that's one family in every third church.

Every person in here knows a widow. And we'll let that word widow represent not only those who have lost a spouse, but anyone who is lonely, despondent, in need of a friend. How would your world change if you very practically reached out to *one* of those people and served and loved them and made them a part of your family? Not all of them, just one?

Every person in here has the ability to do something in ServerDU. What would it look like if you refused to simply paint the wall, but you got to know the person whose wall you're painting? What would it look like if you didn't just volunteer a couple of hours in the pregnancy support center, but you took a young pregnant mom into your family? What would it look like if we didn't do something *to* our community or even *for* our community, but *with* our community? What if we incarnated ourselves into our community the way that Christ incarnated himself here on earth? How would that change our backyard?

And finally, maybe this has been a really good sermon for you about the need for social justice. If that's the end-all be-all, then it could be that you don't understand that *you* are the orphan. Maybe you don't realize that Jesus lived, died, and rose again so that *you* could be adopted. Don't leave this place today without talking to one of our prayer counselors about starting a relationship with Jesus.

Pure religion. Undeclared religion. Redeemed religion...is not about what we do to be accepted by God, it's how we serve *after* we realize how much we've been accepted by Jesus. Let's pray.

Helpful resources:

- *Adopted for Life*, Russell Moore
- *Fields of the Fatherless*, Tom Davis
- *Red Letters*, Tom Davis
- And of course, I'm indebted to my fellow pastors / brothers who spurred great conversations in the midst of sermon preparation: Spence Shelton, Jason Gaston, Curt Alan, J.D. Greear, Todd Unzicker, David Talbert, Rick Langston, and whoever I likely forgot. Sorry, forgotten one. ☺

