

# Are You Religious?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 19 April 2020

Preacher: Colin Dow

[ 0 : 00 ] 26 and 27, James chapter 1. People say they aren't religious anymore, but they are, because it's in the nature of human beings to be religious, to look for something greater than ourselves for meaning.

Those who say they aren't religious have just swapped the old gods for new ones. 21. Scientism has become a god, the belief that science has all the answers to all the questions of our existence. 22. Materialism has become a god, the belief that all we can sense is all that is. In the United Kingdom today, there are a bewildering array of religions, from Islam to Wiccanism, from scientism to the religion of the Jedi.

Make no mistake, everyone in our society is religious, because by definition, to be a human being is to be religious.

However, for every one person who claims not to be religious, there is another person who claims to be religious, who claims to be morally upright, claims to be devoted to whatever god it is they serve.

[ 1 : 33 ] And as Christians, we're no different. For many people, Christianity is just one more way up the mountain, of no greater or lesser validity than any of the other religions.

We all know people who claim to be Christians, who claim to be religious. But what of their claim to be religious? How can we test it?

Well, in the thought world of James chapter 1, of course, we could talk about whether they are wise, or whether they're foolish, or whether their wisdom is from God.

We could talk about whether they are persevering in their faith, and not giving up. We could talk about whether they are quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry.

Whether they hear God's word. All of them are tests, as it were, of whether we are truly religious. But in the context of James 1, 26-27, the chief test is this.

[ 2 : 37 ] They do not merely listen to the word of the gospel. They put it into practice in their lives. Their listening is accompanied by doing.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as we say. If the gospel is believed, then it will also be lived. If the gospel is believed, then it will also be lived.

Faith comes first. That work must follow, lest there is no faith at all. Having established the priority of putting the word of the gospel into practice in our lives, in verses 22-25, James now moves on to provide us with three avenues by which we can demonstrate that we are not mere hearers of the word, but doers also.

This is how to prove that as opposed to those who say they aren't religious at all, but are really, or those who say they are religious, but aren't really, you can't both say that you are religious in the proper sense, in that you believe and trust in the gospel of Christ, and you put that gospel into practice in your life.

Three questions. First, can you control your tongue? Second, do you care for the helpless? Third, are you cutting off worldliness?

[ 4 : 16 ] The three C's test. Control, care, and cutting off. Control your tongue.

Can you control your tongue? That's the first point. Can you control your tongue? James begins the test of whether we are truly religious or not, whether we have really believed and are living out the gospel by saying in verse 26, if anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

James has already spoken about being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, but now he gets very direct indeed. He says, you need to keep a tight rein on your tongue.

He's going to develop this issue of speech later in his book, but he's introducing it here in the first chapter to show that what we say and how we say it is of great importance to our Christian faith. But to all intents and purposes, it is the first test of the genuineness of our understanding of the gospel. Can you control your tongue?

[ 5 : 36 ] Are you in control of it or is it in control of you? The word James uses, which we translate as keep a tight rein, is taken from the world of horsemanship.

The bridle is fixed in the horse's mouth so that the rider can control its direction. This is the tight rein to which James refers, the bit which allows the horse to be controlled by the rider rather than the rider to be controlled by the horse.

In a moment of Saturday morning TV flicking last year on some obscure sports channel, I came across the sport of American bull riding.

I think it's a big thing like the American Southwest. It's a huge thing. Packed out arenas, poster boy riders and famous bulls. How long can that rider stay on the back of a bull whose only intention is to throw him, gore him and kill him?

And so that the enraged bull is let loose with this rider firmly positioned on his back. And the bull does everything to throw its rider. It jumps up and down. It twists itself around and runs in circles.

[ 6 : 51 ] And if that rider can get 30 seconds on that bull, he has done really, really well. He usually lasts no longer than 10. Because these bulls are bred for only one purpose, to throw the riders.

The bull wants to be in control of itself and it hates the fact that some dumb guy is sitting on its back trying to tell it what to do.

Well, I didn't think much of it at the time, but American pro-bull riding isn't quite so different from what James is describing here in James 1.26. The tongue is like the bull.

It wants to control the direction we take rather than for us to control it. Let's take an example. Back in 1 Samuel 14, Israel is at war with the Philistines.

King Saul's army is vastly outnumbered, but he was determined to be victorious. The day for battle arrived and unknown to King Saul, his son Jonathan, together with 600 men, staged an attack on the Philistine camp.

[ 8 : 08 ] As a result, the Philistines were thrown into confusion. The rest of the Israelite army, seeing the Philistines' confusion, began to pursue them.

But their efforts ground to a halt because at the very beginning of the day before the attack, King Saul had made a rash oath with his tongue.

He had said, Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself and my enemies. Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes.

It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last that King Saul's tongue controlled him and not the other way round.

As a result, his army flagged in their pursuit of the Philistines. But more seriously than that, Jonathan, Saul's son, who had not heard his father making that oath, had eaten some honey he had found on the ground.

[ 9 : 17 ] And when King Saul heard about it, he resolved to kill his own son. It was only when the Israelite army put Saul firmly in his place that King Saul relented.

See how much trouble King Saul's tongue got him into? You can see the bull throwing its rider. It lost him the victory and it almost cost him his son.

We could take many other examples from the Bible. King Herod, whose rash promise led to the execution of John the Baptist. Ananias and Sapphira, whose lies led them to death.

Is my tongue leading me down the same road? Is it controlling me or am I controlling it? It is.

Perhaps only time will tell the personal disasters which could have been averted if only we had kept a tight rein on our tongues.

We control every other part of our bodies. So why can't we control this? James is going to go deeper into detail on the issue of controlling our speech later in this book.

[ 10 : 36 ] but how careful we must be not to tie ourselves in knots or back ourselves into corners by our words. Words like cursed be anyone who eats food before evening comes.

Who knows? Our words may not just cost us the battle. Our words may also cost us our lives. So let me give you this first test.

Am I gaining ground on the control of my tongue? Am I growing in the faith? Am I more careful about what I say and how I say it? Phil Stogner recently taught me to use the word wait whenever

I'm going to say something.

Wait. It stands for why am I talking? Wait. It may mean that I still say what I was going to say but at least I've thought about it beforehand.

As long as we live in this present situation we are never going to perfectly be able to control our tongues. But the question is this. Am I gaining ground on the control of my tongue?

[ 11 : 52 ] Am I getting better at riding that boom? Am I getting a tighter rein on the bit in the horse's mouth? Is the gospel progressively impacting not just what I think and what I do but what I say?

Consider Jesus of whom it was said he committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth. We want to be like him. We can be like him through the gospel and by his grace.

so we make every effort to keep a tight rein in our tongues. Do you control your tongue? Second, do you care for the helpless?

Do you care for the helpless? In the world of James' day, the vast majority of people lived on the bread line. They were literally one day away from hunger and poverty.

For us, the prayer give us this day our daily bread is fairly meaningless but for the early Christians it was the difference between life and death.

[ 13 : 07 ] Most workers were paid on a daily basis and for those who worked in the agricultural sector, one bad harvest or one swarm of locusts could signal starvation for an entire village.

In James' day, there were many relatively helpless people. There was no social security system and so the early church often stepped in to help.

We read in Acts chapter 6 of many widows being the early beneficiaries of the church's charity. The early church did not recognize the dichotomy we place between being theologically rigorous and socially active.

For them, one was the other and the other would one. If you were at all devoted to Jesus, you were devoted to the practical expression of love for the helpless.

What drove such charity was an intimate awareness, as the apostle Paul puts it, that though he, Jesus, was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that we, through his poverty, might become rich.

[ 14 : 21 ] The son of man became fabulously poor, in order that we might become fabulously rich. How then can we express our devotion to Jesus for his gospel?

How may our faith in Christ find expression in good works? And James says, it's by caring for the helpless. He uses the examples of widows and orphans, of whom there were many in James' day. Many Jewish men served in Rome's armies. They didn't come back from wars. Parents died from illness because life expectancy was short. There were no social security systems, no orphans homes.

Widows were helpless, many of them ended up on the streets begging. Orphans became no more than street kids, feral, underfed, dirty and unhealthy.

These were the helpless ones at whom decent people looked down their noses. From time to time, they might have thrown a coin into a widow's box.

[ 15 : 36 ] That's as close as they'd ever get to helping the helpless. Make no mistake, when James talks about widows and orphans being in distress, he is not overestimating their suffering.

The word he uses, which we translate as distress, flips, and is translated in other places as troubles or tribulations. It was encoded within the law of Moses.

Listen to God's command in Exodus 22, verses 21 through 23. Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.

If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry, my anger will be aroused. So throughout the Old Testament, mistreatment of the helpless resulted in God's curse upon the land. And James is saying to the early church, he's saying, look, this is the Christian way. We look after the helpless. In fact, the word James uses, which we translate as look after, is that from which we get the church office of a bishop, the episcopate, the one who looks over.

[ 17 : 01 ] Who are the helpless in our society? Those for whom it's the Christian way that we should care for them, that we should advocate for them, that we should look over them.

With the social security system we have in our own nation, perhaps the physical needs of the orphan and the widow aren't so obvious, but their emotional and spiritual and mental needs may be even more severe, and we must be eager to meet the challenge.

who are the helpless in our society for whom we are to demonstrate our faith in action? Well, you can choose to agree or disagree with me, but let me suggest three groups of people.

In the first instance, those who are genuinely fleeing violence and threat in their own lands, the so-called aliens of the Old Testament for whom Israel was to care.

It seems to me that the conservative evangelical church has been seen as slow to care in this area.

Secondly, those who are caught up in destructive cycles of addiction.

[ 18 : 19 ] They may be partly to blame for their own actions, but nevertheless, they are entirely helpless before their addictions. And then thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, those at the beginning of life and at the end of life.

The unborn child in the womb and those approaching the end of life. That's why the church has traditionally been so vocal concerning abortion and euthanasia, because we are passionate about caring for the most helpless in our society.

community. Remember, it was a Christian called William Wilberforce, who was instrumental in the emancipation of slaves in Great Britain, those who were helpless in their day.

It was a Christian named Dame Cicely Saunders, who was responsible for the beginning of the hospice movement, where human beings that afforded dignity in death, rather than the medically induced murder we call euthanasia.

And so Christians today are to be in the forefront, politically, socially, and religiously, of caring for the most helpless in our society. This is entirely as spiritual inaction, as controlling our plans, or keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world.

[ 19 : 51 ] Remember the parable of the sheep and the goats and what it tells us about the value of clothing the naked, and feeding the hungry, and caring for the sick. Too often, our church has been known for its separation from society, that the world can go to hell just as long as we can go to heaven.

But James calls the church to put its faith into practice and show that we are genuinely religious.

Where then is the religious man?

is he locked away in a room praying and studying his Bible? Or is she helping out at a pregnancy advice center, volunteering at a soup kitchen for addicts?

He does one because she does the other. He does the other because she does the one. That's true religion. That's the gospel at work.

That's God's grace demonstrated. Are you caring for the helpless? And then lastly, are you cutting off worldliness?

[ 21 : 02 ] Are you cutting off worldliness? James puts forward a third test of whether we are mere listeners to the word, and doers also. That we keep ourselves from being polluted by the world.

world. We need first to control our tongues. We need second to care for the helpless. We need third to cut off worldliness. Did I say need to?

Yes, certainly need to. But also be doing so for the operation of the grace of the gospel in our hearts tends towards these things.

this is what we need to do. This is what we want to do. And by the spirit of God transforming us, this is what we can do.

It is important that we understand what the world represents in the mind of James. It is not a place.

The world is not the place outside the limits of sacred buildings.

[ 22 : 14 ] It is sloppy and wrong to aimlessly point at the door of the church and say, outside that door is the world. In my experience, there is often as much of the world inside sacred buildings as there is outside sacred buildings.

Nor is the world necessarily a way of life. The world as the Bible understands it does not correspond necessarily to music, to art, to culture, to sport, to technology.

Some people mistakenly believe that if they become Christians, they need to throw their bagpipes into the sea, stop enjoying abstract art, stop going to the theatre, stop playing football, and most definitely stop engaging in any scientific endeavour.

No, no and no again. As the great Dutch Christian Abraham Kuyper emphasised time and time again, the whole of life is to be lived to the glory of God.

To quote my favourite commentator on this passage, the world is a common biblical way of referring to the ungodly worldview and lifestyle that characterises human life in its estrangement from its creator.

[ 23 : 45 ] Let me read that again. The world is a common biblical way of referring to the ungodly worldview and lifestyle that characterises human life in its estrangement from its creator.

In other words, the world is anything anti-God. Another commentator fascinatingly describes worldliness in this way.

He says, it is the desire to possess and gather. It is the desire to possess and gather. Isn't that interesting? It paints a rather different picture to the one we might once have had concerning worldliness.

We tend to think of worldliness in terms of drinking, gambling, partying, and I'm not saying that these activities aren't dangerous because they are. But perhaps the worldliest things of all are those things which we consider to be respectable.

The all consuming desire to possess and gather the world as it stands anti-God. So again, I'm going back to personal opinion here.

[ 25 : 07 ] The most spiritually deadening program on the TV as far as I'm concerned is Homes Under the Hammer. Maybe different for you, but Homes Under the Hammer is all about money, money, and more money, about buying houses in order to make money, to make money out of your tenants, to make money out of your improvements.

As far as I'm concerned, it is the ultimate possess and gather program. It's so respectable, and yet if we should imbibe or accept the premise of the program, it is as entirely destructive to our Christian faith as excess violence or bad language.

You might call this a hobby horse of mine, but I genuinely think possess and gather type programs may well be the most dangerous and worldly shows on TV. Because what they make you think is that more money is the answer to all your problems, and not Jesus.

Please don't stop watching daytime TV just because I don't like it. think rather of what things make you think that the answer to all your problems in life lies somewhere else than in Jesus.

Let me say that again. Think of what things in your life make you think that the answer to all your problems lies somewhere else than in Jesus.

[ 26 : 44 ] Career is a good thing, but it can be a worldly thing. if we make it possess and gather and pursue it with no reference to God.

Relationships are good things, but they can turn worldly if we make them possess and gather and pursue them godlessly. Religion itself can be a good thing, but it can turn worldly if we think that we can replace our need for Jesus with our performance of ceremonies or our attendance at church or our moral righteousness.

And the question for us is this, are we cutting off these things? Are we showing them or are we showing them mercy? Are we continuing to cherish them in the secret places of the heart? use old worldly language, are we mortifying sin in our lives? Are we putting it to death? It's a struggle.

It's always going to be a struggle. And we need God's grace in the gospel of Christ to supply all our ones. But do we genuinely believe that we need anything more than Jesus to make us happy and supply all our needs?

[ 28 : 05 ] Well, whatever that thing is, we need to cut it off. We can claim as much as we like to be religious, just like we can say that we're Christians.

But as we saw last week, there is a big difference between being a mere hearer of the word and a doer of the word. James here gives three examples of how the word of the gospel is to be put into practice in our lives.

Controlling our tongues, caring for the helpless, cutting off worthiness. After all, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, based on faith in Christ, this is the only kind of religion God our Father will never accept.

let us pray. O Lord God, forgive us for ever compartmentalising our faith and not giving it public expression.

Forgive us, O Lord, for not keeping a tight rein in our tongues. Help us to grow in control. Forgive us, Lord, for being apathetic toward the helpless.

[ 29 : 24 ] forgive us, O Lord, for tolerating those things in our lives which we treat as panaceas. Help us, O Lord, to cut off worldliness and to realise that Jesus is all we need to make us happy.

Heavenly Father, we pray that the gospel would support us and grace would change us, that Jesus would be our inspiration. we ask these things in his name.

Amen. Where then shall we have power to do these things, to control our tongues, to care for the helpless and to cut off worldliness?

It shall be in the power of the cross. And that is our final hymn this evening, O to see the dawn of the darkest day, Christ on the road to the colony.

Thank you. Thank you.