

True Religion

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[0 : 00] James, chapter 1, verses 26 and 27.! Please follow along as I read.

! If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue,! but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

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.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are grateful this morning that we are able to gather as your people. We thank you for your word that you have breathed out and you have preserved over the ages.

[1 : 10] Lord, we pray, Lord, that you would use your word this morning to build this church and to direct our lives.

Lord, would you speak to us? Would you speak to us corporately? Would you speak to us individually as you know we need to hear from you? Would you give me grace to proclaim your word?

Would you give all of us grace to hear your word and obey your word? We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. When I read the Gospels, one of the shocking and sobering aspects for me is to observe that the scribes and the Pharisees, who were considered to be the most religious people of that day, were further away from God than the tax collectors and the prostitutes, who were considered to be the most religious of that day.

The scribes and the Pharisees had the law of Moses, which they claimed to observe, and they had 613 other laws that they made up. And yet Jesus told them in Matthew 21, 31, Truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.

That's what he said to the scribes and the Pharisees. As far as Jesus was concerned, the religion of the Pharisees was worthless. And the truth is, when we consider our realities today, very little has changed.

[2 : 59] We still have people who were like the scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They claim to be near God, but they are far from God. They have the appearance of being devoted to God, but their religion is worthless.

The scripture that we just read this morning, the apostle James is condemning the worthless religion of people in his day.

And James addresses true religion. He addresses the religion that is valued by God. And he makes this simple and sobering point in these two verses.

Religion that is valued by God is marked by a bridled tongue a caring heart and a holy life. In other words, you can know the Bible from cover to cover.

You can articulate right doctrine. But that in itself is not pleasing to God. That in and of itself is not pleasing to God.

[4 : 17] True religion must be lived out in a manner that is pleasing and acceptable to God. Now, is James saying to us that this is all that true religion is about, how we govern our tongue, how we care for the needy, and how we relate to the world?

He's not saying that at all. He's not saying that these are the comprehensive tests of true religion. But what he is saying is that they are a sufficient test of true religion.

John Calvin clearly summarizes the point that James make about true religion by saying that James not only defines generally what religion is, but reminds us that religion without these things, he mentions, is nothing.

He doesn't define religion generally, but what he's saying to us is that religion without these things, these three things, is nothing.

So James is not devaluing things like prayer. He's not devaluing fasting and Bible reading. He seems to be highlighting these three marks of true religion in verses 26 and 27, largely because these other ones, if he doesn't mention, are more private acts.

[5 : 53] And religion is the outward public expression of an inward relationship with God. And so these two verses this morning, James provides us with three marks of true religion.

And on this first Sunday of 2018, I want us to consider them so that by the grace of God, the religion that we live out before God and before the world will be true and not fake.

As I prayed about the first sermon for the year, I find that for me, that's probably the most challenging part of identifying any particular sermon because I somehow over the years have come to this place of conviction that God gives us like a rudder at the beginning of the year.

He gives us this pointed direction to send us in a particular way. And I try my best to pray and to hear what the Lord might say to us. And I felt the Lord led me to this text, not yesterday, but weeks ago as I took time a way to seek the Lord for us as a church for this year.

And as you'll see from the quarterly sermon card that you have, this sermon is actually the first of four sermons on the Christian life. The other three are true forgiveness, true repentance, and true discipleship.

[7 : 32] So again, James gives us three marks of true religion and here they are. Number one, a bridal tongue. Number two, a caring heart.

And number three, a holy life. So let's consider each of these in order. The first one, true religion is marked by a bridal tongue. Notice again what James says in verse 26.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Now exactly what do these two words mean?

Religious and religion. What do they mean? Well, first of all, these words are very rare in the New Testament and perhaps that's the reason that we don't use them a whole lot and we try to avoid using them.

But the words religious and religion are very general in their meaning and they refer to worship in general, especially the outward practice of ceremonies in honor of a god, any god.

[8 : 49] And therefore, from the Christian viewpoint, the words religious and religion are comprehensive words for the specific ways in which our outward, sorry, in which our inward relationship to God is outwardly expressed in our lives.

So that's what religion or religious is for us. It is our inward relationship with God being outwardly expressed in our lives.

That's how James is using these words, religious and religion. And his point is that governed or controlled speech is a mark of true religion.

The person who lacks control over his speech and says whatever he wants to say, whenever he wants to say it, and however he wants to say it, James says, deceives himself in thinking that he is religious, but he's really not.

His religion, James says, is worthless. James is saying to us that a governed tongue is evidence of a transformed heart because our mouths speak out of our hearts.

[10 : 10] And this is a recurring theme in James. We see earlier in verse 19, he tells us that we have to be slow to speak. And then later in chapter 3, he dedicates the entire chapter talking about the tongue and talking about speech.

Notice that James uses this word bridle as the instrument to control our tongue. And it communicates vividly an image that I believe all of us can relate to who understand a bridle and how they're used with horses.

And what James is saying to us is that our tongue is like a horse that needs to be governed and directed. Our tongue is like a horse that needs to be governed, needs to be directed.

Now, while James is addressing the issue of speech, he's addressing more than speech. The issue is more than speech.

James is not merely urging us to become more disciplined in our speech. That's the fruit that he is after.

[11 : 26] But that's not the root issue. The root issue is different. The root issue in what James is addressing is the issue of humility. True religion is marked by humility and humility in terms of speech will manifest itself in a bridled tongue.

A governed tongue. Sometimes it's choosing not to give a response in the face of provocation. Sometimes it's giving a soft answer in the face of anger. Sometimes it is engaging in thoughtful, careful speech, refusing to match the other person word for word. Brothers and sisters, a bridled tongue is the fruit of a humble heart. James isn't saying if we don't bridle our tongues and say whatever we like and whenever we like and whenever we like, we're deceiving ourselves into thinking that's okay. That's what he is saying. He's saying if that's what we do, if we're saying what we want to say, how we want to say it, when we want to say it, and we think that's okay, James says you're deceived. James says if you think that God is okay with that, then you're deceived. [12:51] He says such a person's religion is worthless. And James uses a strong word for worthless. It's the same word that in the New Testament is used for idolatry.

James says your religion, if that's the way you are relating with your tongue, says your religion is no better than idolatry.

Now that's strong language. And I believe it's strong language because it's a serious matter. It's strong language to say to Christians that your religion is worthless.

It is like idolatry. But James writes these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and he's communicating God's heart to us that if we think we are religious and we don't discipline our tongues, our religion is no different from idolatry.

And so on this first Sunday of this new year we need to be honest with ourselves, honest before the Lord, or we need to consider whether our lives are marked by this mark of true religion, a bridled tongue.

[14:19] When's the last time you opened your mouth to say something that you knew wasn't right and you were checked and you didn't say it? When was the last time you backed down from a verbal argument?

Do you always have to have the last word in a discussion or in a debate or in an argument? and as a husband or a wife, what does the way that you speak to your spouse say about your religion?

Do you bridle your tongue and govern your speech or you do what people say just let it rip? And I think this is a very important one for us to consider those of us who are married because how little discipline we tend to use with one another, that person to whom we are married, that person before whom we vowed to God that we would love and we would care for.

How easy it is to be less disciplined with our tongues with that person than sometimes total strangers. Again, James says if we're not bridling our tongues and we think that God is okay with that, he says we're deceived.

Parents and children, what does your speech say about your religion? And to the children this morning want to say you are to always be respectful of your parents.

[16:15] You especially are to bridle your tongue when you speak with your parents. But parents really do the same. Being a parent doesn't give us a license to have an bridle tongue when we speak to our children.

children. And as a parent I know this is hard. As a parent I have failed at any number of points over the years and still do at times in sufficiently bridling my own tongue in my speech with my children. But God calls us to discipline speech. and we don't have a license to violate that even towards our children or those under us.

I think we can consider this also in the context of our workplaces. is what about when you're speaking about or with your employer or with a fellow employee?

What does your speech say about your religion? Does it say that your religion is worthless or that your religion is something that God values?

[17:39] And as we evaluate this area of speech, as we evaluate this area of a bridal tongue, really it goes even deeper than evaluating for a bridal tongue, whether we have one or not.

It goes more to evaluating whether we have a humble heart. You see, a truly humble heart will have a bridal tongue, will seek to honor the Lord with our speech, and minister grace to those who hear. But when we are proud in heart, we say whatever we like, whenever we like, however we like, and it matters not what people think. That's an arrogant, not a humble heart that takes that approach. And so more than praying, oh Lord, give me a bridal tongue, we need to be praying, oh Lord, give me a humble heart. because a humble heart will manifest a bridal tongue.

The second mark of true religion that James identifies for us is a caring heart. In verse 27, James specifies a caring heart as visiting orphans and widows in their affliction.

[19 : 05] orphaned and widows were considered helpless people in both the Old and the New Testament. And there are many commands that God gave to protect them and to care for them.

And God even threatens to punish those who exploit them and take advantage of them. Now clearly, orphans and widows are not the only needy people.

they weren't the only needy people then and certainly not the only needy people today. There are some orphans and widows who are actually quite wealthy.

And they don't need the particular care that James is driving out. But that's not the norm. The norm is that orphans and widows are needy people.

And James tells us that we have to visit them in their affliction. Now the reason that James identifies these two needy groups is likely because there was an abundance of orphans and widows at that time.

[20 : 25] Women were generally outliving men women and women in those days who was left because of the way society was structured and because of the way that women were seen, they were vulnerable, really couldn't take care of themselves and they were even in a more vulnerable position if they had children to feed.

And so James seems to highlight these two for that particular reason. And it's interesting that James doesn't say to us that we are to give to them.

He says what we have to do is we have to visit them. Although giving to them is certainly within the scope of visiting them in their affliction. But what James says is we are to visit them.

He seems to be getting at something that is a bit more fundamental. He seems to be saying that true religion that flows from a genuine relationship with God the Father is marked by a true concern for the helpless.

It's marked by taking time with them, identifying with them in their affliction. That's something we can all do. So if James had said we must give to them, some of us could say, well, I don't have to give, I don't have enough to spare.

[21 : 44] That's not what he says. He says we have to visit them, we have to identify with them in their affliction. So we may not have the material resources, the financial resources, but every single one of us can show care, every single one of us can show concern through identifying with them.

now, probably, if we were to take a poll, there are many of us in this room who probably don't know any orphans, probably don't know any widows,!

And might use that to exempt ourselves from this particular part of Scripture because we would say we have no way of fulfilling it. But that's not what James is really driving at.

James is not so much saying it is these two groups that you must visit and you must show compassion towards.

It's interesting that there's one group that James does not mention. And these three are almost always in the Old Testament connected together. And the one group that he doesn't mention is the alien, the person living in another land that is not his home country.

[23 : 10] And perhaps the reason that James does not mention alien in this context is that the people to whom he was writing were themselves aliens. We learn that from verse 1 of the opening chapter, chapter 1, verse 1.

James says he was writing to those in the dispersion, those who had been dispersed out of the land, presumably from the persecution that came during the time of the early church.

So that's probably why James doesn't refer to aliens, and he only focuses on the orphans and the widows.

But in the Old Testament, God called for protection and care of aliens alongside the widows and the orphans. For example, in Jeremiah 22, verse 3, we read, Thus says the Lord, Do justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed.

And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. So James is not ignoring the alien, he just doesn't mention them.

[24 : 28] He's choosing to focus on these two needy groups who would have been an abundance in his audience. So while the category of orphans and widows might not be very relevant to us, in this category of helpless people, foreigners who live among us is certainly very relevant to us.

needy. Again, not every immigrant in our country is needy, but many are. And true religion can be measured by our response to the needy ones, the ones we're aware of, the ones that we come into contact with.

What is your response when you watch the news or you read the newspaper about another group of illegal immigrants who were apprehended? Is your response the typical echo of the wider population, a response of indifference and a response of prejudice?

Or is it caring and compassionate, a response that is indicative of true religion? And how do you treat the immigrant who perhaps cuts your grass or cleans your home?

At a minimum, we must give them a fair wage. At a minimum, we have to pay them a fair wage. But if our religion is true, we would also have caring hearts towards them, identifying with their plight, identifying with their vulnerability, identifying with their affliction, and helping them in any legitimate way that we can.

[26 : 30] And I believe, I firmly believe, that our immigration laws should be enforced in the same way as all of our laws. I believe they should be enforced firmly, they should be enforced consistently, and they should be enforced humanely.

But brothers and sisters, if we truly identify with God's heart, and our attitude towards immigrants, legal or illegal, will not be with any kind of national prejudice, any kind of prideful arrogance, that sadly is the norm in our country today.

It mustn't be. And it's not one or the other. We can be law-abiding, we can uphold the law, and at the same time, we can be compassionate.

As I pondered this, and I don't have time to go into all of what has been in my heart and what is in my heart this morning, but I'll say this.

If God's word is true, and it is, God will hold us as a nation accountable for our exploitation of countless thousands of helpless immigrants who have come to our shores over many decades.

[28 : 12] God took more than 400 years to deal with the Egyptians who enslaved the children of Israel. And so we should not take comfort in the fact that he has not yet dealt with us.

And if you have been halfway involved in living in this country, me, and you'd be honest this morning, you would know that what I say is not unfounded.

We have, still have, our own form of modern slavery in this country where there are people who literally own individuals by virtue of having a paper over them.

That's my patience, some would say. And brothers and sisters, the Lord has warned us.

The Lord has threatened that those who would exploit the weak and the needy, the alien, the orphan, the widow, he himself will take vengeance.

[29 : 37] One of the realities of living in a local church is that we will always have opportunities to demonstrate care within our church family.

This is in an ongoing way. It just happens. It's the reality of the human condition. Just very recently, we had two individuals in our church hospitalized.

The church was made aware. Bernika was in hospital. Chauncey Miller was in hospital. My question to you this morning is, how did you demonstrate care?

Did you pray? did you pick up the phone to call Bernal or Jan to ask how they were doing? Did you pick up the phone to speak with Sarah to see how Chauncey was doing?

Did you visit them in hospital? Brothers and sisters, if our religion is not marked by a caring heart, our religion is not true religion.

[30 : 56] it is not enough. It is not enough to have right doctrine and to have all the trappings that we belong to God if we are not demonstrating our true belonging to God in this way of having a caring heart.

God, we live in a time where we are so engrossed and we are so busy with so many things that oftentimes we don't have the time to care.

And if we don't have the time to care, we're too busy. If we don't have the time to demonstrate care in these ongoing ways, in different degrees at different times, and I know that sometimes needs meet us in different seasons, but brothers and sisters, what does it say about us long term in terms of how we relate to these kinds of opportunities that we have to demonstrate care?

love. If our religion is not marked by a caring heart, our religion is worthless.

True religion is marked by a bridal tongue, a caring heart, and third and finally, true religion is marked by a holy life. love. In the latter part of verse 27, James says, pure and undefiled religion

before God the Father is this, to keep oneself unstained from the world.

[32 : 50] And here we're being reminded that God is concerned about our relationship to the world. And his concern is that we keep ourselves from being unstained by the world.

But to put it another way, his concern is a concern for worldliness. That's the stain of the world. When James talks about the world when he wrote to his original audience, he didn't explain what he meant by the world.

He didn't explain what he meant by keeping themselves unstained from the world. And so we can safely assume that they understood what he meant. But sometimes we can be fuzzy about what he means by the world.

James is not talking about the physical world. The worlds of mountains and trees and rivers and seas.

Instead he's talking about the moral world. He's talking about the world of fallen humanity organized in rebellion against God without reference to his laws, without reference to his values, and indifferent towards coming judgment.

[34 : 14] He's talking about that moral world. And he's saying to us that we have to keep ourselves unstained from that moral world. If we are practicing true religion, we would keep ourselves unstained from the world.

And see, James appreciates that we live in the world. What he's saying to us is don't become so close to the world, the moral world, that we become stained by it.

James does not want us to be ignorant. He tells us that the world has the potential to stain us. We must keep ourselves unstained from the world.

And really, in a nutshell, what James is calling us for, or to, he's calling us to a holy life. It is a call to give evidence to the fact that the religion that we claim is not worthless.

And see, we demonstrate our awareness of the world's staining potential by being careful how we relate to the world. If we are careless in our interaction with the world and its fears and all that it offers, if we approach it without discernment, then we are really unaware, or we just don't care about the world's potential to stain us.

[35 : 47] Are you aware of the world's staining potential? Are you aware that this world in which we live in poses the risk to us of being stained with worldliness?

and if we aren't, ignorance puts us at a greater risk. And I'll mention one area in which we daily face risk, because it's a very large and pervasive one, increasingly so, and it's the broad area of entertainment.

This is important for us to remember that the producers of entertainment today do not have Christians in mind.

They don't have us in mind when they produce what they produce, and we have no right to demand that they produce for us that which we are able to enjoy.

And sometimes we can find ourselves forcing ourselves to partake of or to enjoy what they have produced.

[37 : 11] And when we find ourselves with unbelievers, among unbelievers, enjoying sin, enjoying that which Christ died for, brothers and sisters, something is wrong.

We have not just become stained by worldliness, we have become infected by worldliness so much so that we cannot detect it. And the concern is broad.

The concern is even for things that would seem to be innocent. The Oprah Winfrey's and the Dr. Phil's that so many imbibe of, and as they do, they are having their minds programmed in such a way that it dulls them to the things of God.

And what is disguised as entertainment is nothing more than worldliness. We're being stained by the world.

And James says when that happens, our religion is not true. Connected to it is social media.

[38 : 29] Almost on a daily basis, we have our smartphones and other smart devices, and they are ample opportunity after opportunity after opportunity to be stained by the world if we don't use discernment and we don't use wisdom.

So many of the so-called motivation videos that are passed around are nothing more than unvanishing humanism that many of us read and pass around without discernment, not realizing that we are being infected by worldliness and we are spreading the germ to others.

And brothers and sisters, this is the concern this morning and this concern will grow in this year because wickedness will mature into its highest form before the Lord returns.

And that's the whole idea of the wheat and the tails growing together. Both are to mature. We are to be growing in righteousness as well. So let me ask you this morning, what is your attitude towards the world, towards its values?

and its practices? Would it be defined as being careful? Would your interaction with the things of this world be defined as being careful as you sift through movie choices, as you choose clothing, time, as you choose how to use your time?

[40 : 19] Would your attitude and your practices be defined as being careful to keep yourself unstained from the world? Jesus prayed.

The last prayer we have recorded in scripture that he prayed in John 17, one of the prayers he prayed for those who would come to believe in him is for them not to be taken out of the world, but to be kept from the evil in the world, to be kept from the evil one in particular.

But my question this morning is, are we aware of the world's staining potential? And do we care? If we don't care, James is saying, James is saying, but your religion is worthless. And it becomes easy to do because we live in an age where many, even in the church, are making an effort to be more like the world.

Whole churches are trying to look less like the church intentionally and look more like the world intentionally, hoping, foolishly, in vain, to attract it.

[41 : 47] Mark Devon insightfully said that the church is becoming so much like the world, that the world has no questions for us. We're just like them.

We don't raise any questions about difference. We're just like them. They have no questions for us. And understand this morning that what James is saying is that this concern about keeping ourselves unstained from the world is ongoing.

It is not, I do it now and then I'm done with it. No, we will have to do this until the day we die. We will have to be vigilant. We will have to be careful as we interact with this world that has the potential to stain us with worldliness and values that are opposed to God and all that he stands for and what he has called us to.

And so this is an ongoing call. This is an ongoing commitment that we must all make to keep ourselves unstained from the world.

We are called to live a holy life that is unstained by the world. And here again, what is behind a holy life? What is behind a holy life is a holy heart.

[43 : 20] A heart that is separated unto the Lord. And so to pursue a holy life, we pursue a holy heart before the Lord.

And so brothers and sisters, on this first day of this first Lord's day of the new year, God is speaking to us.

He's telling us that we must not just rely on the things we say. We must not just rely on professions we make. He says that we must have evidence in our lives that our hearts have been transformed. And this one of you considered these three particular marks of a bridal tongue, of a caring heart, and of a holy life. one of the common threads between these three marks is self-denial.

It takes self-denial to have a bridal tongue. Sometimes we want to say things, but we have to deny ourselves to not say it. it takes out denial to have a caring heart.

[44 : 51] Because sometimes when we are called upon to care, we may have other distractions and other things that we prefer to do. And it requires that we put those things aside and that we live out what it means to belong to the Lord.

And we demonstrate care to those in the need of our care. and having a holy life requires that we deny ourselves as well because our flesh will crave that which God disapproves of.

And we must be willing to deny self. And this is what the Lord has called us to. He called each of us to take up our crosses, not just to take them up, but Luke says to take them up daily.

And the image of the cross is self-sacrifice. The image of the cross is to die to ourselves and to our will.

Luke understands that the death we died yesterday is not good for tomorrow, not good for today. We have to pick it up again and we have to die to today's cravings desires.

[46 : 18] And the greatest error we can make this morning as we consider this is to think that we could grit our teeth and strengthen our spiritual muscles and say, let's do this.

We're going to do this. We can't. Although scripture calls us to do these things, it will take more than self effort.

It will take grace motivated, grace enabled effort if we're going to bridle our tongues. We need God's grace to do it. If we're going to truly have genuine care for one another and for others in need, we're going to need God's grace to do it.

None of us in and of ourselves is good enough to want to do that. We're going to have to cry out to God's grace for that. And if we're going to live lives that are unstained by the world, if we're going to live lives that are holy before the Lord, we're going to need grace to do that.

Because none of us in ourselves is good enough and holy enough to desire that life. love. And this morning, if there's conviction in your heart about any aspect of this message and these marks, as I pray there should be, we shouldn't despair.

[47 : 47] because if there's conviction in your heart, that's an evidence of grace. That's an evidence of the grace of God that's at work in you and that's reason not to despair, that's reason to hope, that's reason to cry out to God and ask him for mercy, ask him for grace to be able to have true religion.

that is not false, that is not fake, it's not like the Pharisees. Thank you, we're near to God and we're far from him.

Before I pray and we sing our closing song this morning, I want us to just take a moment right where we are seated. Let's quietly pray and respond to the Lord, however he has spoken to our hearts this morning.

Thank you.