

Marks of True Religion

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much, Anika. Please turn your Bible to the letter of James, chapter 1.

! We're continuing our sermon series in the letter of James, and this morning our attention! Our attention will be directed to two verses, verses 26 and 27.

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. Would you pray with me? Father, we are thankful that you have preserved your word over many centuries, that we would have a record of it. We ask in this moment that you would speak to us through your word.

Would you speak to us corporately and individually.

Father, we pray that in the preaching of your word that your name would be glorified.

[2 : 01] Lord, I acknowledge once again my desperate need for you and your spirit and your help. And so I pray that you would come in your power and enable me to be faithful to proclaim your word to your people. We ask, O Lord, that you would demonstrate your presence through the power of the proclaimed word. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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

The scribes and the Pharisees, they followed the laws of Moses and in addition, the Pharisees had 613 other laws that they made and sought to follow. And yet Jesus said to them in Matthew 23, 23, he says to them, truly I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. As far as Jesus was concerned, all that the Pharisees did and portrayed was just worthless. Jesus felt that the tax collectors and the prostitutes, sorry, who demonstrated no religious affection, no outward show of being near to God. Jesus said, they are going into the kingdom ahead of those Pharisees and scribes who had extreme shows of serving God and being near to

God. And the truth is, those realities remain today. Those realities remain today because we have many people, we can call them modern day scribes and Pharisees, who claim to be near God, but they are far from him in so many ways. They only have an appearance of being near to God and devoted to him.

And the two verses of scripture that we have just read, the Apostle James is condemning that kind of religion. He's condemning worthless religion. And what he says to us in essence is this, religion that is valued by God is marked by a bridled tongue, a caring heart, and a holy life.

[5 : 17] In other words, James is saying to us that we can know our Bibles from cover to cover. We can articulate right doctrine, but that in and of itself is not pleasing to God.

That in and of itself is no measure of true religion. Religion that is valued by God is marked by a bridled tongue, a caring heart, and a holy life. Now clearly James is not limiting what it means to truly serve God and to truly be a religious person to three things.

He doesn't address praying and he doesn't address reading our Bibles. He doesn't address fasting. And he's not saying to us that this is an exhaustive test. It's a comprehensive test. He's not saying that at all. What he's saying to us though is this is a sufficient test of true religion. And perhaps the reason he doesn't mention other ones like prayer and fasting and reading our Bibles is because those are private acts of religious affection. But he addresses these three that are more visible.

These three that are more outward in an ongoing way. These are public aspects that James says that we need to consider if we are going to measure ourselves as being religious in the way that God approves of.

And so this morning what I want to do in our remaining time is I want us to consider how a bridal tongue, a caring heart, and a holy life are marks of true religion.

[7 : 26] And we begin with the first one, 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 what does James mean by the word religious or what does he also mean by religion? Well these words are very rare in the New Testament.

And perhaps that's the reason that Christians don't use them very much. But the words religious and religion refer to worship in general. And they actually refer to worship of any God.

Whether it's the true and the living God or some idol God. And so from the Christian viewpoint, when we talk about religious and religion, certainly the context that James was referring to them, it refers to this inward relationship to God that is outwardly expressed in our lives.

That's how James was using these two words, religious and religion. He's not addressing Muslims. He's not addressing Buddhists. He's not addressing people from other religions.

[8 : 48] He's addressing those who profess to know God. He's addressing the twelve tribes who were in the dispersion. And he's saying to them, in terms of religion for them, which would have been to have shows of following God through Jesus Christ.

And he lifted up to them these three particular marks. And he said that true religion is marked in these particular ways, beginning with this first one, the ability to govern our tongue.

And what James is saying is that people who do not bridle their tongue, people who do not govern their speech, are deceived in thinking that they are religious. He uses a very strong word.

He says their religion is worthless. And why is it worthless? Why is James saying that what you're doing is worthless? The reason he's saying that is because when Christ comes into our lives, when he truly comes in, there is a transforming effect that takes place in our lives, and it transforms every aspect of our lives, including our speech.

No, it doesn't happen overnight. It doesn't happen the moment one comes to Christ necessarily. But it happens.

[10 : 20] And over time, the transforming effect of Christ is to touch our lives in broad ways. And one of the common aspects of it that James brings to our attention this morning is our speech, something we do in an ongoing way every single day.

And this is a very important aspect of the Christian life that James raises. And you'll see it repeated again and again in this letter. We saw it in the memory verse we've been studying, and we saw it in this sermon last week, where James says to us that every one of us should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to be angry.

And when he talks about anger, the anger there is not just an emotional feeling, but it's anger that is manifested in speech. That's what he's getting at. That we need to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to be angry in terms of our outbursts and the things that we would say.

James uses the word bridle to give us a vivid picture of what he has in mind. And I think most of us know that a bridle is that apparatus that's put on the head of a horse and it's used, or mule, any kind of animal like that, to guide and to control where they should go.

And James is telling us that our tongue is like that horse or that mule or that donkey that needs a bridle to guide it and to direct it because without that bridle on our tongues, our tongues can be just like that horse going in all kinds of different directions where it actually shouldn't go.

[12 : 12] But it's important for us to see that James is addressing speech, but he's addressing more than speech. James is not just telling us to be very careful that we speak in certain ways.

Brothers and sisters, James is actually addressing issues of our hearts because the root issue of an unbridled tongue is a proud heart.

True religion is marked by humility, a humility of heart will be manifested with a bridle tongue, a tongue that isn't quick to speak, a tongue that is not quick to have outbursts of anger.

True humility is marked by a humble heart, is marked by a bridle tongue. Sometimes it's choosing not to respond in the face of provocation.

Sometimes it's giving a soft answer in the face of aggravation. Sometimes it's engaging in careful, thoughtful speech, not matching the other person word for word.

[13:38] Brothers and sisters, a bridle tongue is the fruit of a humble heart. And James is saying to us that if we don't bridle our tongues and we say whatever we like, however we like, and whenever we like, he says we're deceiving our hearts.

We're deceiving ourselves to think that that is okay. And James is saying that our religion is worthless because it's not affecting this very vital part of our lives.

It is supposed to affect it. When Christ comes into our lives, he is to transform our speech as well as the other parts of our lives.

Friends, if we are conversing, using our tongues in the same way that we did prior to coming to Christ, Christ, let's reason to pause and ask the question, what difference is Christ making in my life, in particular in this area?

And James says, if we're not governing our tongues, if that transforming effect of Christ in our lives is not transforming our speech, he says, well then your religion is worthless.

[15:07] And again, James is speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and so it's not just James giving us his thoughts and giving us his ideas. This is James writing to us the very word of God.

And so how should we think about this mark of true religion? Well the truth is there's only one who fully and perfectly bridled his tongue and that's the Lord Jesus Christ.

All the rest of us, we do that to different degrees. And so I think one of the first things that we should consider this morning is whether we bridle our tongues at all.

do you, do I bridle my tongue, your tongue at all? And let's think about that in the context of the variety of relationships we have.

Relationships at home with family members, siblings, spouse. Let's think about it in terms of our workplaces, the people we work with.

[16:24] Let's think of it in the church. Let's think of it when we go into business places and perhaps get service that is less than what we should get.

What does it look like for us? Do you ever back down from verbal arguments?

because you sense the spirit calling you to do so? Do you always have to have the last word? Even when you're tempted to restrain yourself?

do you habitually give people a piece of your mind? And your only concern is to vent rather than consider the effect of your words on the person who's hearing.

I pray that all of us would be able to to some degree or another say yeah sometimes I do bridle my tongue.

[17:51] Sometimes I do sense the prompting of the spirit to say no more or to say nothing at all. Friends to whatever degree we are experiencing those promptings it's an indication that God is at work.

in our hearts and in our lives. It's an indication that Christ is having that transforming effect on our speech.

But I know there's room for all of us to grow to one degree or another. And so what we need to do is we need to confess pride. We need to look to the Lord for grace to grow in humility because ultimately it is a humble heart.

That will produce humble speech. It's a humble heart that will give us a bridled tongue. In addition to a bridled tongue, the second mark of true religion that James identifies for us is a caring heart.

We see that in verse 27. And James specifically refers to visiting orphans and caring for widows in the affliction as evidences of having a caring and a compassionate heart.

[19:13] And the time that James would have been writing, orphans and widows would have really had very, very difficult lives.

They have them today. Many who are orphans and widows have hard lives today. But you could only imagine what it must have been like in James day and certainly even back in Old Testament times.

And so the Lord actually, in the Old Testament, repeatedly promised that he would take care of the widow and of the orphan.

We see one example of that in Exodus 22, verses 22 through 24, we read, you shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.

If you mistreat them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry and my wrath will burn and I will kill you with the sword and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

[20 : 17] Those are strong words from the Lord. He singles out these two groups in this particular verse and he says, if you mistreat them, widows and orphans are very vulnerable and because we are sinful, we will take advantage of the weakest.

And the Lord put his name on the line. He says, if you do that, you will answer to me. He says, I will kill you with the sword and I will make your wives become widows.

And your children fatherless. Now, widows and orphans obviously are not the only people who are in need.

And not all widows and not all orphans are needy. There are some very wealthy widows and there are some very wealthy orphans. men who would have been largely the case in the day of James. In his day, they would have been especially vulnerable. You think of a widow in those days because men generally were the providers and took care of their wives and took care of their children.

[21 : 38] When a woman was widowed, she pretty much was without support. And if she had children, that even made it especially difficult.

And so James highlights them and he says true religion, those who have true religion, will be concerned for them, will be caring about them, will visit them in their affliction.

And it's a given. He knows that that's going to be their lot. By and large, they will have difficulties.

It's interesting that James doesn't say, give to them, although that is probably included in visiting them. And I think it is so easy for us to use a term that I'm sure you've heard, throw money at needs, and not put ourselves in the need, not put our hearts in the need.

We can just throw money at it. But James says, no, you demonstrate your care for them by visiting them, by identifying them, identifying with them in their affliction.

[23 : 03] We might not all have material and financial needs to help them, but we all can care, and we all have time to do whatever is important for us.

And James says, we can visit them. Notice he doesn't even put an obligation to say do a particular thing, although if we truly care and we have the ability, the means to tangibly help, we will do that. But James brings us all on a plain ground and he says, visit, because it's something all of us who are able-bodied are able to do once our hearts are caring enough to go and to reach out to them. Now I know one of the immediate responses for some of us this morning may be, I don't know any riddows and I don't know any orphans. And that may be very, very true. And I don't think that we should hear James as only looking at these two groups of needy people alone.

Obviously this was a common and a pressing need and so I think James raised it in terms of two groups of people who were needy.

[24 : 23] And you could think about it in a lot of different practical ways. These people were scattered. I think the life expectancy of women still is longer than men so a lot of these women would have no doubt had lived their husbands and so James was directing them to this particular need.

But what other needy groups that you might know if you don't know orphans, if you don't know widows? There's another needy group that is certainly relevant for us in our particular culture and we see it also in the Old Testament in particular.

Normally when the Lord talks about three vulnerable groups, he would talk about the widow, he would talk about the orphan, but he also talked about the alien. And look at what it says in Jeremiah chapter 22 verse 3.

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, excuse me, the fatherless and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in their places.

so James was not ignoring the alien. Again, it probably was because they themselves, those who he was writing to, they were aliens.

[26 : 00] They were dispersed in other countries. But aliens would certainly be very relevant for us in our country where we have a large number of foreigners who live among us.

Again, not every immigrant in our country is needy, but many are. And true religion is measured in terms of our response to the needy period.

And true religion will be measured by our response to those immigrants with whom we come in contact with, who are needy, and what goes on in our hearts when we meet them in their

circumstances of need.

For some of us, these individuals work for us. They work in our home cleaning, or they may work cutting our grass, or serving in different ways, doing other kinds of work for us.

And oftentimes we can come face to face with their needs. And even though they may earn an income, their needs are still evident, and their needs are still real. And the question is, what goes on in our hearts?

[27 : 29] Is our hearts more affected by indifference, prejudice, and more aligned with the pervasive view that exists in our country towards foreigners?

Or is it a caring and a compassionate heart that sees that person in their need, and like God's heart towards them, our heart is likewise moved towards them?

And see, that's the first response. It doesn't yet get into what do I do for them, it gets first into do I care for them? Or is my heart stone cold towards them?

And is my heart gripped by all manner of other things that betray the one whom you claim to serve and to follow?

Since this is true, religion is marked by a caring heart. Because the religion that we are living outwardly is one that claims to be worshipping a God who cares for the needy, and he cares for the alien.

[29 : 03] And the reality is about having a caring heart is it takes time. It takes time. It takes time to care and to demonstrate that care.

And in our busy world, and with our busy lives, it is so easy to be distracted by all manner of things. And sometimes we can miss opportunities to care and to demonstrate true religion.

I was just thinking, I just thought recently about time in my own life. And just thought about how much time I really have.

time. And even sometimes when I feel pressed and I say, well, I can't do this, I find, in retrospect, you know what, I could have done that. But in the moment, you can be blinded to think, well, I don't have the time to go or to call or to do whatever.

know what I But we have these opportunities. We have opportunities right in our local church. We have opportunities to care and to demonstrate how we care for those who are needy.

[30 : 29] And I want to encourage us, as the Lord shows us these opportunities, remember we have time. Remember we are able to at least get with them, call them, support them.

We have individuals in our church who have walked through just extended illness for a long period of time and their names are kept before you. Let us take an opportunity to try to show care and concern for them.

At minimum, we can be praying for them. what James tells us the true religion is marked by a bridal tongue, a caring heart, and third and finally he tells us the true religion is marked by a holy life.

Notice how he says that in the latter part of verse 27. He says it's to keep oneself unstained from the world.

To keep oneself unstained from the world. And here we're being reminded that God is concerned about our relationship with the world and his concern is that we keep ourselves unstained by the world.

[31 : 51] Or to put it another way, God is concerned with worldliness and that it doesn't stain our lives. And James is being very particular with what he's saying.

He doesn't use the word touch. He uses this word stain. And he says that we are to keep ourselves unstained from the world.

Now what does James mean by world? Do you think he means the physical world? The world that we see all around us?

Trees and birds and flowers? No. James is not talking about the physical world. James is talking about the moral world.

He's speaking about the world morally. And when we think of the world morally, what we think about is we think of fallen humanity organized in rebellion against God with no regard for his laws, no regard for his values, and indifference to the fact that judgment is coming.

[33 : 04] That's the world. Living with their backs to God in his world and doing their own thing.

James says we must keep ourselves unstained from that world. And notice James obviously understands. He's not advocating withdrawal from the world.

James understands that we will be in this world. He understands that we will associate with this world. The only way you can get stained by something is becoming close to it. If James was advocating withdrawal, he doesn't have to worry about being stained by the world.

But he's not advocating that. James recognizes that we are to be in this world. We are to live in this world. We are to engage this world. But he says that we are to engage this world in such a way that we are not stained by it.

And here he is obviously echoing the words of Jesus that we are to be in the world and not of it. And Jesus specifically prayed that prayer for us. He prayed that we would be sanctified in this world.

[34 : 21] He prayed that we would be separate from this world. He made it so distinctively clear in John 17. He said, Father, I'm not praying for the world, but I'm praying for these, that you keep them in this world, that they may be in it but not of it.

And James tells us that one of the marks of true religion is the ability to live in this world and not have the stain of this world on our lives.

And what that is, is it is a call to a holy life. It is a call to live a life other than the lives that are being lived in this world. It is a call to give evidence that we belong to God, that our religion is not worthless, because a heart that has been transformed by Christ will live a holy life that is in the world, but not stained by the world.

And one of the things that we do is we demonstrate our awareness of this world's staining potential by the care or the carefulness with which we live in this world.

See, if we're indifferent and we're living any kind of how, and it doesn't matter to us, and we're not mindful of these things that we're hearing this morning that James has told us, then we're not aware of the world's staining potential.

[36 : 05] world. We're not aware of worldliness. We're not concerned about worldliness. One of the best definitions that I have come across, more of a description than a definition, sorry, of worldliness that I come back to regularly in my own life, is this definition by Ian Murray, in his book, *Evangelicalism Divided*, *Evangelicalism Divided*.

Here's how Ian Murray describes worldliness. He writes, worldliness is departing from God. It is a man-centered way of thinking.

It proposes objectives that demand no radical breach with man's fallen nature. It judges the importance of things by the present and material results.

It weighs success by numbers. Worldliness covets human esteem and wants no unpopularity. It knows no truth for which it is worth suffering.

It declines to be a fool for Christ's sake. worldliness is the mindset of the unregenerate. It adopts idols and it is at war with God.

[37 : 43] so I want to ask you this morning are you aware where you might be especially at risk of being stained with the world?

Are you aware of the extent to which you may have allowed worldliness to creep in to your life? And our lives are multifaceted and worldliness can creep in through so many different doors in our lives. And it is only this awareness and this trusting of the spirit that will help us to be on guard against this mindset of the unregenerate that Ian Murray refers to.

There are two big areas that I think are worth mentioning this morning that are gateways to worldliness and I would say in an increasing way in our world.

And the first is the area of entertainment. It is amazing the extent to which people are demanding to be entertained more and more and more.

[39 : 12] It is almost like there was a time when children would say I'm bored. I'm bored. Now there are adults saying I'm bored. And looking to all manner of things to entertain them.

And for those of us who follow Christ we must remember that the bulk of the entertainment that is produced in the world is not produced for us. They don't produce them with Christians in mind. When producers are sitting around the table to develop a movie they don't think about Christians largely.

And so friends we need to be discerning. We need to recognize this and we need to remember that the world does not owe us anything. The world doesn't owe us a movie so that we decide okay I have to watch the one that's the least bad of all of them.

The world doesn't owe us anything. And we must be discerning. We must be discerning in terms of the mindsets that are being communicated.

[40 : 27] Whether it is popular figures like Oprah Winfrey or popular psychologists like Dr. Phil and others.

Friends we need to guard ourselves against the mindset of the unregenerate no matter how plausible it may sound. No matter how pleasant it may seem.

We must demonstrate our awareness of the staining potential of the world in which we live. And then the second is the area of social media.

This is the biggest marketplace I believe for worldliness. Ideas beyond the amount that we can engage but they're coming at us in so many different ways for those who are on social media and I would say to us that we have to be discerning.

We need to remember these words of Ian Murray about the mindset of the unregenerate knowing no truth that it's willing to pay a price for.

[41 : 40] The unwillingness to be a fool for Christ's sake. The temptation to simply go along with the crowd because we don't want to stand out.

friends we have to live in this world and not be stained by it. Because a mark of true religion is we keep ourselves unstained from the world.

I remember reading a quote by Mark Deva many years ago and he said that the church has become so much like the world that the world has no questions for us.

See our lives are supposed to ask a question. Our lives, the decisions we make, the way we carry ourselves in this world, the way we comport ourselves in this world, there should be a question mark about us.

People should wonder. They should just pass us by, of course, I'm not talking about when you go in the food store and you just pass somebody by, I'm talking about the people we work with, the people we live with.

[42 : 55] Those who see us on an ongoing basis, they should see a distinction between us and the world and it should raise a question. But sadly, no questions are raised.

Friends, we are called to live a holy life that is unstained by the world and when we do it, we will raise a question because the world is going in another direction. What is behind a holy life?

Behind a holy life is a holy heart, a heart that is separated unto God. And so the way that we pursue a holy life is through a holy heart.

before the Lord. And one of the best ways I could commend to us to pursue all that is to take this word seriously.

To take this seriously. To recognize that you realize that God's word is the most important treasure that we have. And when we take this book seriously, we will live holy lives.

[44 : 11] Because we will seek to order our lives and to live by what we find in the pages of God's holy word. James says, true religion is marked by a bridal tongue, a caring heart, and a holy life.

And one of the common characteristics of these three marks of true religion is self-denial. Denial of self.

Denial of self is really only possible because of what we heard James address earlier in this letter in verse 18. where he tells us that God of his own will brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Friends, seeking to live in this way, seeking to have these marks on our lives away from a relationship with Jesus Christ, will just make us purely religious people following some regimen away from a vital relationship with the Lord.

And it will be frustrating because what we are being called to is founded upon this relationship with God through the new birth that the Lord himself brings about in our lives.

[45 : 55] Does it take effort? Yes, it does. But that effort is grace-motivated. That effort is grace-enabled. And this morning, if your heart is convicted in any way, that you have fallen short in any of these areas, I just say to you, don't despair.

Because if your heart is convicted, that is an evidence of God's grace at work in your heart. If you aren't convicted, and should be convicted, well, then that's a concern.

But don't despair if you find yourself being convicted this morning. Cry out to the Lord and say, God, would you help this not to be a passing conviction? Help this to be a lasting conviction, and give me the grace to grow in whatever area you find yourself being convicted this morning.

Well, before I pray for us, I'm just going to ask you to bow right where you are. Let us ponder what we've heard this morning, and then the team is going to come and leave us in our closing song. Amen. Lord, thank you for your word.

[47 : 32] Thank you for reminding us that true religion religion that matters to you is marked by a bridal tongue, a caring heart, and a holy life.

Would you help those of us who belong to Christ, Lord, to manifest day by day true religion, that communicates that we have a vital relationship with you.

We pray and ask in Jesus' name. Amen.