

“Getting Religion Right (Part 1)”– James 1:26-27

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and meet me in James 1...

David Platt, a pastor who formerly served as the president of the International Mission Board, the arm of the Southern Baptist denomination that focusses on mission work outside of North America, once made the following statement:

“I am convinced the deep, dark secret of our religious subculture in the southern United States is that we want Christianity and we want church on our terms, according to our preferences, aligning with our lifestyles. We are a people happy to go to church just so long as nothing in our lives has to change. We are a people glad to be Christians just so long as we can define Christianity according to what accommodates us. The only problem is that in order for the religion of Christianity to be authentic, true, and actually acceptable before God, we have to let Him define what it looks like.”¹

He’s right. And the point *should* be obvious, but in practice people these days don’t seem all that interested in letting the Lord Himself define Christian faith and practice. If we want our religion to be acceptable to God, then it stands to reason that we would allow God’s revelation to inform our view on such things. Instead, we live in a time, it would seem, where people think they can get by without His input, cater to their own tastes, and then expect Him to be indifferent about it or even happy with their choices. However, that is just not the case.

Our passage today is one of many places where the Bible sheds light on what actually pleases the Lord in our faith and practice. James’ words here are not all there is to say on the matter, but they are serious and too often neglected. They fit nicely into his repeated emphasis that genuine faith is proven by actions, not knowledge or mere profession. In the immediate context, he has just underscored the point that we must not be mere hearers of God’s Word, but doers. Now he pivots to some examples of what “doers” actually do. And in so doing, I think we can discern three marks of religion that God finds acceptable and pleasing. These marks will then be fleshed out in greater detail in the remaining chapters.

Let’s look at the text. I’ll begin reading where we left off in verse 26. Follow along as I read these final two verses of chapter 1. This is God’s Word...

“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.” (James 1:26-27)

Now some of you recoil a little at these verses because of James’ choice of language. It’s not uncommon for church people to feel a little uneasy when people start talking about “*religion*”.

Religion or Relationship?

In certain circles this word has very negative connotations. Religious people get a bad rap today. Sometimes that's because certain academic elites have characterized religious people in some kind of way, generally by interacting with more fringe elements of our faith, or constructing straw men that are easy to humiliate, or failing to apply their standards of epistemology to their own belief systems (and I do mean "belief" systems, because even the most atheistic voices out there still build their worldviews by accepting certain presuppositions *by faith*).

But even Christians often recoil from the labels of religion. We often don't view or use the word positively, but pejoratively. Religion conjures up empty and ritualistic activities and traditions, things that the Bible doesn't require. Cold formalism. "Religion, we feel, is what is left when the Spirit leaves the building."² This negative perspective is probably, in part, owing to the many religious figures and leaders we encounter in the ministry of Jesus who were such poor examples and clearly not right with God, despite their reputations in the eyes of their religious community. So when we see "religious" people come up to Jesus—be they the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, or the like—we can pretty much guess that they are going to be the butt of the joke. We don't want to be those guys. So we get pretty nervous when people start describing us as religious.

In fact, it's quite common for Christians today to say things like, "Christianity is not really a religion; it's a relationship." Now, in a very real sense, there is a significant truth embedded in that statement. When people say that, they are trying to show that no one becomes a Christian by their works. No one is saved by their personal record of obedience and religious observance. The standard that God is worthy of is perfection. We all missed the mark badly. So if there is to be any saving, then it will have to be orchestrated by God and given to people who don't deserve it and could never earn it.

The good news is that this is why Jesus came. He was perfect. He hit the mark every time and in every way imaginable. He alone met the standard. And yet He died, a punishment that was to be reserved for sinners who didn't. So why did He die? Because God is holy and if sinners like us are going to be with Him then a sacrifice is needed to atone for our sin. We deserve death and separation for our rebellion, but Jesus, who didn't deserve that, accepts that treatment in our place. At the heart of the Gospel and our salvation is a Substitute. Paul described it like this:

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21)

There's the substitution. The sinless One is treated like a sinner so that sinful ones like us could be counted righteous in Him. And in this way God remains a God of justice, because He did not let our sin go unpunished, and He offers us the greatest mercy imaginable—to have our sins forgiven and His affection showered on us as His children. As the Bible says elsewhere:

"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:23-26)

This is the Gospel. And the word "Gospel" means "good news." And the good news is that we can be made right with God because of the work of Jesus Christ. We are not saved by our works, even religious works, but by His. And we receive that salvation as a free gift through faith—believing in and trusting in Jesus as our only hope in life and in death. And because of the sufficiency of Christ's work on our behalf, we have been adopted as children of God and brought into a right relationship with God. And, therefore, the Christian life is relational. It's a life lived in fellowship with God. And that is what people tend to mean when they say that Christianity is not so much about religion, but relationship. They mean that the Christian life is not a list of dos and don'ts we do to try to make God like us and accept us. It's about enjoying a life of personal relationship with God that we

can have because of the work of Jesus Christ. To which I say, Amen! Hallelujah! What a Savior! That is all right. That's all good. And you can experience that salvation today by trusting in Christ. And you should. He won't turn you away. He knew us at our worst and He still died to save us.

But having said that, if we are just going off of the Merriam-Webster definition of the word "religion," then Christianity would fit the bill. The dictionary definition of "religion" is simply "the service and worship of God" or a "commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance."³ More importantly, the word that James uses in Greek, does not have all the connotations we sometime attach to and seek to avoid in the term "religion."⁴ For James, religion doesn't have to have any negative baggage necessarily.⁵ True religion, for James, does not exclude the possibility of relationship. And, in keeping with the emphasis of these verses, "true religion is characterized by a lifestyle of obedience."⁶

James, in other words, wants us to be "*religious*" in the truest sense of the word, which is to say that our outward actions are the fruit of our inward transformation and relationship with God. When he goes on to describe those who are truly religious, he is presupposing their genuine faith and relationship to Christ. As the writer of Hebrews said, without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). So the activity that James is going to associate with true "*religion*" is the activity of faith, otherwise it wouldn't be pleasing to God. "Religion is thus a comprehensive word for the specific ways in which a heart-relationship to God is expressed in our lives."⁷ Don't let James' "*religious*" language throw you off. Previous generations of Christians have always been comfortable with this language.

Now before we get to some⁸ of the characteristics of true "*religion*" from a biblical point of view, I want to remind you that these things are not arbitrary. We saw last week that James describes the law of God as perfect and I argued that its perfection is tied to the perfection of God. We don't steal, because God is a giver. We don't lie, because God is true to His Word. We don't commit adultery, because God is faithful. We don't murder, because God is the giver of life. And so on. His instructions are always shaped by His character.

Well James here describes three characteristics of what he calls "*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father*" (1:27). They involve our words, are compassion, and our purity in the world. But these things are fitting because they reflect the character of God. When we practice them, we show ourselves to be, in Jesus' words, children of our Father in heaven (e.g., Matt. 5:45). And this is hinted at when we compare our text today with verses 17 and 18, where the Father is described.

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." (James 1:17-18)

Remember that word translated "*he brought us forth*" is birth language in Greek. We've considered how James is describing conversion, where the believer is born again by the "*word of truth*" (i.e. Gospel). In this new birth, we have become children of God. And one of the interesting things about children is that they tend to take on the traits of their parent. There is a family resemblance. That's why we have the expression...

Like Father, Like Child

Children of God increasingly bear a resemblance to the Father. J. A. Motyer captures this well in his commentary on James. He writes:

"This sequence is bound together by the fact that the same three features are central to the acts of God the Father (18) and the acts of his new-born children (26–27): he first reached out to us through the life-giving word he spoke, that is, 'the word of truth' (18), and we, on our part, should be marked by a bridled tongue (26). Behind his spoken word lay that act of his will whereby he determined what he

would do for us (18), deprived in nature and death-bound though we were (14–15). In a word, our Father cares about the needy, and so should we (27a). But his life-giving work for us had a purpose, ‘the first fruits’ (18), namely that we should be specially his and notably holy. Therefore we ought to bear the mark of a personal holiness unstained from the world (27b).”⁹

So what James describes in verses 26 and 27 about the Christian lifestyle is not random. It’s reminiscent of the same graces that they have experienced from God the Father. The Christian ethic is built on what we see in God. “It is right that the life which he has given to us should bear the same fruits in us as in him.”¹⁰ And James is so convinced of this that he dedicates most of the rest of the letter to exploring these characteristics. “Good deeds to the poor and needy dominate 2:14–26, control of the tongue is the theme of 3:1–12, and staying unstained by the world governs 3:13–5:6.”¹¹ Since they are so much of the focus in later chapters, I’m not going to get into a lot of detail today and next week. But let me at least introduce them and make some preliminary remarks...

Three Marks of Right Religion

We can detect the first one 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.*” So what’s our first mark?

Mark 1: Controlled Mouths

It has long been recognized that people running their mouths can be a dangerous thing.

“The boneless tongue, so small and weak,
Can crush and kill,” declares the Greek.
“The tongue destroys a greater horde,”
The Turk asserts, “than does the sword.”
The Persian proverb wisely saith,
“A lengthy tongue—an early death!”
Or sometimes takes this form instead,
“Don’t let your tongue cut off your head.”
“The tongue can speak a word whose speed,”
Say the Chinese, “outstrips the steed.”
The Arab sages said in part,
“The tongue’s great storehouse is the heart.”
From Hebrew was the maxim sprung.
“Thy feet should slip, but ne’er the tongue.”
The sacred writer crowns the whole,
“Who keeps the tongue doth keep his soul.”¹²

We’ve already seen James instruct us to “*be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger*” (1:19). Now he speaks of the importance of bridling the tongue. What is a bridle? It’s the headgear that you put on a horse so you can control it. A horse is a power creature that can do a lot of damage. If you are going to ride one, then you need a way get it to slow down or turn the direction you need it to go. That’s what a bridle makes possible. It allows you to control that powerful creature, so it doesn’t do you or anyone else any harm.

Well, James is going to say that we can do a lot of damage with our tongues. They can deal death, like a fire or a poison. So it’s important that Christians exercise control over their mouths. We must bridle the tongue. But interestingly, the one who “*does not bridle his tongue*”, says James, “*deceives his heart*” into thinking “*he is*

religious” when in fact “*this person’s religion is worthless.*” You might say, “religious talk is cheap.”¹³ But the rest of our words, the way we characteristically talk, is quite revealing. It can show if our religion has any value.

Now James is not saying that Christians never say sinful things. We do. Indeed, James is going to say, “*if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body*” (3:2). We all say things that we regret (or should regret) after the fact. We are still being sanctified. But James has noticed that the way we talk is a good guide to what is going on in our heart. He probably learned this from Jesus, who said, “*out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*” (Matt. 12:34). Our tongue will eventually reveal what’s inside of us. But it usually takes some stress to bring that to the light. The problem is that we tend to blame that stress for our reactions and words, instead of our own hearts.

My favorite illustration of this, which I’ve used in the past, comes from C. S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* book. With his characteristic transparency, he writes that as we mature in our faith...

“We begin to notice, besides our particular sinful acts, our sinfulness; begin to be alarmed not only about what we do, but about what we are...When I come to my evening prayers and try to reckon up the sins of the day, nine times out of ten the most obvious one is some sin against charity; I have sulked or snapped or sneered or snubbed or stormed. And the excuse that immediately springs to my mind is that the provocation was so sudden and unexpected; I was caught off my guard, I had not time to collect myself. Now that may be an extenuating circumstance as regards those particular acts: they would obviously be worse if they had been deliberate and premeditated. On the other hand, surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth? If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am. The rats are always there in the cellar, but if you go in shouting and noisily they will have taken cover before you switch on the light.”¹⁴

That’s such a brilliant illustration. If I am trying to figure out if I have a rat problem or a roach problem in the deep recesses of my heart, those pests need to not see me coming or else I won’t get a sense of the scope of the infestation. If they have a noisy or bright warning, they are going to scurry away before I have a chance to see them. But if I jump into and flip on the light suddenly, I just may spot them before they have a chance to conceal themselves. But it’s not the suddenness that created the rat or the roach. It was the suddenness that brought it to my attention. Similarly, in our lives, it’s not the unexpected circumstance and stress of the day created that harsh word you said to your spouse or that sudden outburst in traffic. The stress of the situation simply revealed something about what exists in the deeper recesses of your heart. Remember, “*out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*” and “*what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart*” (Matt. 12:34; 15:18).

Last week I read about a couple interesting exchanges that John Wesley had with certain church members in his day:

“Once while John Wesley was preaching, he noticed a lady in the audience who was known for her critical attitude. All through the service she sat and stared at his new tie. When the meeting ended, she came up to him and said very sharply, ‘Mr. Wesley, the strings on your bow tie are much too long. It’s an offense to me!’ He asked if any of the ladies present happened to have a pair of scissors in their purse. When the scissors were handed to him, he gave them to his critic and asked her to trim the streamers to her liking. After she clipped them off near the collar, he said, ‘Are you sure they’re all right now?’ ‘Yes, that’s much better.’ ‘Then let me have those shears a moment,’ said Wesley. ‘I’m sure you wouldn’t mind if I also gave you a bit of correction. I must tell you, madam, that your tongue is an offense to me—it’s too long! Please stick it out ... I’d like to take some off.’ On another occasion

someone said to Wesley, ‘My talent is to speak my mind.’ Wesley replied, ‘That’s one talent God wouldn’t care a bit if you buried!’”¹⁵

What does your language and your language under stress say about your heart? God’s not done with you yet, so there are going to be sinful words that come out of your mouth. But is that what always seems to come out in times of stress? Is your speech characteristically marked by gossip, coarse joking, slander, spiteful words, or deception? If so, then it may be revealing that your religion is worthless, just “an empty shell.”¹⁶ Why? Because “Not controlling our speech is a sign that we are not actually following God.”¹⁷ Kent Hughes summarizes it well,

“James does not mean that those who sometimes fall into this sin have a worthless religion, for all are guilty at times. But he is saying that if anyone’s tongue is habitually unbridled, though his church attendance be impeccable, his Bible knowledge envied, his prayers many, his tithes exemplary, and though he ‘considers himself religious...he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.’”¹⁸

So that’s Mark 1 of right religion, according to James: a controlled mouth. What’s next?

Mark 2: Cared for Margins

By “margins” I mean the people in the margins. The marginalized. People like the widows and orphans that James spoke of in verse 27...

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...” (James 1:27)

Why single out widows and orphans here? Because in the first-century, Greco-Roman world that James was a part of widows and orphans were among the most vulnerable and destitute. They are two representative groups that convey the idea of looking out for those who are in need and often forgotten. I want to say more about this than I have time to say today, so we are going to circle back to this second mark and cover the third mark next week, which is countercultural morals.

But let me say this, while I think there is definitely room for improvement in our care for widows and orphans and people on the margins of our city, I am grateful to serve in a church that seems to constantly rise to the challenge when God brings certain needs to our attention. We definitely have room to grow. There are definitely people that slip through the cracks from time to time. I’m certainly guilty of this far too often. But generally speaking, I have been blessed to witness and repeatedly challenged by the compassion and care that you have exhibited to one another and to those that God has brought across our path. It’s something special.

Take just the orphan issue...I have told you repeatedly that one of my favorite things about this church is the adoption culture that exists here. Adoption is not for everyone, of course, but so many of you have expressed interest in orphan care, or have adopted children, or foster children, or support ministries that care for children and mothers in crisis. It’s awesome. And if you are interested in considering whether adopting a child is something that God may intend for your life, I encourage you to make that known. No matter what area you may be interested in—respite care, fostering children, special needs children, infants, older children, diverse families, domestic adoptions, international adoptions, or whatever—there is a pretty good chance we have someone in this church with firsthand experience in that area. And we would love to connect you with them. It’s a part of our family’s story and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

And to have that kind of culture alive and well in our midst is a really good sign, given what James says here. We are reminded that God—the Father to the fatherless—is pleased when we care for the fatherless of the

world. They experience His care through us. We are going to unpack that more next week, but I want to close with something that is really exciting...

[The story and status of our 719 House]

Next time we will talk more about the second and third marks of right religion that James outlines. We will also share the Lord's Supper together, so come prepared for that. Let's pray...

¹ David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in James* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 26.

² Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 60.

³ See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/religion>.

⁴ "Modern evangelicals often avoid the word 'religion' and its cognates when describing true Christianity. In the evangelical subculture, the word 'religion' connotes institutionalized or cultic observances without reference to saving faith. Interestingly, the Greek words here rendered 'religious' (thrēskos) and 'religion' (thrēskeia) also connote 'religious service ... especially as expressed in a system of external observances.' Outside of James 1:26–27, only the noun form (thrēskeia) occurs elsewhere in the NT (Acts 26:5; Col. 2:18). Perhaps James alludes to the neutral or potentially negative sense of the words thrēskos and thrēskeia—pointing out that the world views the external observances of religion differently than how God weighs such behavior. It is also important to note that the English word 'religion' (and its cognates) did not carry such negative connotations in previous generations, nor does it currently in all Christian traditions." Robert L. Plummer, "James" in *Hebrews-Revelation* (ESVEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 240.

⁵ "James uses 'religion' positively here, for religion is defensible. Public displays are not necessarily contrary to true faith. Public ceremonies may be valid or invalid. The Lord himself instituted some public rituals. He ordained circumcision, baptism, the Passover, and the Lord's Supper. He ordered believers to worship him in sacred throngs in an incense-filled temple, filled with choirs and well-robed priests." Doriani, 60-61.

⁶ Platt, 27.

⁷ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 75.

⁸ "He does not, of course, intend them as a comprehensive list of religious activities, so that if we do these things we can count ourselves religious, even if we never pray, read the Scriptures, meet in a worshipping fellowship, receive baptism and share the Lord's Supper. But he does offer them as a sufficient test whether or not all that we do under the heading of religion has validity in the sight of God." Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁰ Ibid., 73-74.

¹¹ Doriani, 61.

¹² Found in Hughes, 82. Original source: 5. James S. Hewett, ed., *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1988), 475.

¹³ Doriani, 56.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: McMillan Publishing, 1952), 164-165.

¹⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 81-82.

¹⁶ Plummer, 240.

¹⁷ Sam Allberry, *James For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 52.

¹⁸ Hughes, 81.