

“Getting Religion Right (Part 3)”– 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, one last time, in James 1...

We are going to jump right in today because we have ground to cover yet again. This will be our last week in James 1. I'm pretty sure the pace will be much quicker from this point forward, but I make no promises. I want to read to you the final two verses again and then rehash where we have been. So follow along as I read, beginning in verse 26. Let me remind you that this is God's Word. Listen like you believe that...

“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)

In the last couple weeks we have considered how these verses present us with...

Three Marks of Right Religion

What does God want to see in our religious practice? First of all...

Mark 1: Controlled Mouths

We must bridle the tongue (1:26). We must be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger (1:19). Next...

Mark 2: Cared for Margins

By margins, remember, we mean those who are marginalized and forgotten and uncared for in a society. James gives us the examples of widows and orphans, but, as we have seen, his teaching has even broader applications. If you missed any of that you can catch up on what was said about these first two marks later this week on our website.

Today I want to begin by considering the third and final mark that James mentions. It's found in the very last words of the chapter, let's call it...

Mark 3: Countercultural Morals

In verse 27 we discover that James also considered keeping “*oneself unstained in the world*” to be a critical feature of right religion. But that is no easy task. It requires much vigilance. The stain of sin is literally everywhere we turn in this world, not least of which in our own selves. And living out a biblical morality is increasingly countercultural and even taboo in our world. It's not getting any easier in our setting to embrace a biblical worldview. As one author observes,

“Today's world is increasingly polluted. Much contemporary thought evacuates words of moral meaning: perversion is ‘gay,’ the murder of unborn children is ‘reproductive choice,’ Marxism in the

church is ‘liberation theology.’ Today Isaiah’s lament is being lived out: evil is called good and good evil, and light is darkness and darkness is light (Isaiah 5:20).”¹

James seems to share this cynicism. He uses the noun “*world*” (κοσμός) on three other occasions in the letter (2:5; 3:6; 4:4) and in each case “he is referring to the fallen world system that runs contrary to the ways of God.”² His instructions here remind me a bit of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount, where he compared his followers to salt. He said famously,

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.” (Matthew 5:13)

Salt has a distinctiveness to it. When you take a bite of food you can tell if it’s covered in salt. Believers should have a similar distinctiveness in a fallen world. Our lives look different. There is something countercultural about us, which proves to be good for the world. Like salt, our lives have a preserving and healing effect on the world. Like salt, God will often use us to counteract moral decay in the circles He puts us in contact with. But if the salt loses its saltiness, it’s really not very useful. It adds nothing. It’s unnoticeable and ineffective. So it is with Christians who blend in with the world. When we lose that stark contrast that is biblical morality, we compromise our witness and the world suffers for it. That’s Jesus’ point. And that’s why James stresses the importance of believers keeping themselves “*unstained in the world.*”

James is not suggesting that we will live perfectly this side of glory. “*We all stumble in many ways*”, he’ll remind us in a couple of chapters (3:2). What he *is* saying is reminiscent of Paul’s instructions to “*not conform to the pattern of this world*” (Rom. 12:2; NIV), or as one translation puts it, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould” (Phillips). This means that “as we seek to keep our clothes from being stained, so we should guard our hearts and minds from the moral filth of the world.”³ It’s the idea sometimes expressed by the slogan “in the world, but not of the world.”⁴ Though to be clear, as Daniel Doriani explains,

*“We do not stay pure by abandoning society. We do not gain purity by giving away our radio and television, though we should avoid entertainments that promote and glorify sin. The heirs of true religion neither flee the world nor let it corrupt them. Physically, we dwell in the world, but morally, we keep our distance. We test all things and hold fast to what is good (1 Thess. 5:21). Thus true religion remains undefiled.”*⁵

How we apply James’ teaching, I suppose, will depend on what kind of moral filth we are most drawn to. We must humble ourselves enough to recognize those vulnerabilities, confess our failures to the Lord, ask Him to lead us not into temptation, and trust that He will provide a way of escape when we are met with temptation. We will want to safeguard our lives from those temptations that strike us with more predictability, by avoiding or preventing certain situations and preemptively memorizing God’s Word to help us when those situations find us. This will help us to put into action the instructions that James will give us later—“*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you*” (James 4:7).

But we too must flee. We must get serious about those recurring temptations. We must take drastic measures if necessary. That is what Jesus was getting at when He said the following:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” (Matthew 5:29-30)

Is there hyperbole in those words? Yes, of course, otherwise we would all be limbless and blind. Those limbs, as Jesus Himself taught, are not the ultimate source of our sin. The heart is. And only He can change the heart. But the point stands—we must get serious about our sin and take drastic measures to avoid it and repent. Jesus

and therefore James were very serious about this. Maybe that means you will need to unplug the TV or throw it in the trash. Yeah, I know that sounds crazy, but better to lose an electronic than to forfeit your soul. It's not too crazy when you put it like that. Maybe it would be smart to ditch the smart phone. Maybe you need to resolve right now to never step foot in some place again and ask the Lord to help strengthen that resolve.⁶ Maybe you need to plug in with a Small Group or a Sunday School class so you can build some relationships that can actually encourage you to keep "*unstained in the world*", instead of just surrounding you with those people who keep introducing you to more filth. This is going to look different for each of us. But we each have to get serious about it and we are going to need support because it's an uphill battle in the world.

Now, let me shift gears a bit. Let's review. James has shared with us three different marks of right religion from God's perspective.

Mark 1: Controlled Mouths

Mark 2: Cared for Margins

Mark 3: Countercultural Morals

As I have reflected on these characteristics, I have been struck, first, by how related each of these marks is to one another and, second, by how people's engagement in these is generally pulled in the direction of one to the exclusion of the others.

In our day, not too many people are going to pick up the banner for the first mark. No one seems to value controlling their tongue and being "*quick to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to anger*" (1:19). That's just not how people do things in 2020. How's that working out for us? Not so good. Everyone seems to think that every thought needs to be shared and most of those thoughts evidence very little reflection. We are hasty to make judgments and prone to assume the worst in others. Add to that a looming election and the rhetorical air is toxic and explosive. And, unfortunately, many Christians are breathing it in and out, adding to the problem.

Yet, while the first mark doesn't seem to get a lot of attention today, the second and third do, but not often in conjunction. In other words, there are plenty of people who stress the importance of caring for the people in the margins of our society and squabble about who qualifies as "marginalized," but often these causes seem pretty devoid of biblical morality. On the other hand, there are many who are outspoken about certain points of biblical morality that seem to have been abandoned in society by and large—think abortion ethics, religious liberty concerns, marriage definitions, gender debates, etc.—and yet these same people sometime seem to neglect tangible care for the needy and forgotten around them. It would seem that there is a tendency to be drawn, at least in some superficial and vocal way, toward the second mark (caring for the disadvantaged) or the third mark (letting the Bible define our morality), but you don't see many who seem to champion both in a tangible way.

In other words, there is an imbalance. We see it in society. We see it in churches. And we see it in our individual lives. There is a tug of war between emphases that often leads communities and individuals to major on one of these marks and minor on the others, or major on one to the exclusion of the others. But James is calling us to something better. He's saying Christians ought to be triple majors. We ought to be marked by all three characteristics. True religion that pleases God doesn't pick and choose its pet issues. It seeks the very balance that James describes in verses 26 and 27. Christians are not mark-one people or mark-two people or mark-three people. Christians are mark-one-through-three people.

So how do we fight against the temptation to lose this balance? I suppose that will depend on where the imbalance lies. But I have found that in our setting, since the tug of war seems to be between, on the one hand, compassion ministry or ministry that seeks justice for the marginalized and, on the other hand, proclamation that exposes where our society has deviated from biblical morality, that what is most needed is what is most neglected by both sides—Mark 1, stopping our mouths and engaging our ears. In other words, if we would focus more on this area it would help correct imbalances in the others.

With our remaining time, let me give you a few examples following some concentric circles. We will start broadly, on the societal level. Then move to an example on the denominational level. And then finally get specific to our church.

On a societal level, it's a mess. I'm sure everyone can agree on that. And I'm sure we can all agree that one of the things that stokes the fires is the fact that it is an election year and so there is a lot of tribalism that the world is trying to press upon us. Now those of you who have been here for a long time know that I'm not the kind of pastor that is going to tell you how to vote or turn the pulpit into a stump speech. You should also know that I'm not going to avoid topics just because they have been politicized in the world. I honestly cannot remember a sermon that I went into with the aim of pushing someone to the left or right of a political spectrum. My aim is to help us think biblically about any subject.

When I first started getting more engaged with politics as a young adult, it was quite common for parties to be characterized in certain ways. I've come to realize that things are much more nuanced than these characterizations, but the stereotypes exist for a reason. I remember early on one party being described to me as the party for the forgotten—be they poor, ethnic minorities, foreigners, or whatever—and the other party being characterized as the party that would fight for biblical morality. The latter was even dubbed the “moral majority.” Once again, I know now that things are much more complicated than these stereotypes. And there are certainly people on both sides of the political aisle who care about all of these things, even if they disagree with how best to address them. Nevertheless, the stereotypes persist. And they persist, in my opinion, because of the rhetoric that seems to garner the most attention on each side of the aisle.

A close examination of that rhetoric, at least in my lifetime, would suggest that one side of the aisle cared more about James' second mark and the other side of the aisle cared more about the third mark. One party saying we are going to help the poor and the other saying we are going to prevent a drift into secularization. So depending on where a Christian finds themselves geographically and what issues seem most pressing in their contexts, one could understand the appeal that each party's platform might have on them. And it's easy to see why each group of Christians could find some biblical support for their decision, because, as we have seen, there is biblical justification for many of those social concerns and biblical justification to be quite concerned about the secularization and moral compass of our country. We could argue which issue is more pressing and which side gets more of the issues right, but in the end that is all many people have done—argued. And when you are arguing, you're not listening. You're not practicing mark one. And when you live in a day that is full of echo chambers, it's easy to never hear clearly your best dissenters. And this can lead to imbalances in our lives.

My aim today is not to tell you that one side is more correct than the other. If that is the case, it must be biblically discerned. What I am trying to say is that when we take the time to listen more than we speak, both to those who disagree with us and especially to God's Word, we just may discover that neither side has a lock on the Christian worldview. And we'll likely discover that we don't find a home on either side. We participate in the process. We strive to be good citizens. But we recognize that whatever vision a political party or media is selling us, it is not synonymous with the Kingdom of God. It pales in comparison.

And so our hope will not rest in any political personality. It rests in the Lord. And, therefore, we don't lose our minds in these seasons. We don't despair when our candidate doesn't get elected. We trust in the Lord. We trust that He is sovereign and that He will advance His purposes. We are more confident in our Christ than we are our politics. And this faith serves as an anchor, even when everything and everyone around us seems turbulent. It will keep us from “committing spiritual cannibalism as we choose partisanship over unity in Christ.”⁷ I appreciated the advice Eugene Park offered in a recent article:

“As the 2020 election nears, rather than following the world and putting our confidence in politics, let's instead put our confidence in Christ. Rather than yelling loudly at each other with off-putting certainty in our rightness and the other side's idiocy, let's instead heed Paul's call to ‘walk in a manner worthy of

the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph. 4:1-13)."⁸

That's good advice. He's not suggesting that politics don't matter, and that political action cannot help to redress certain societal ills. And neither am I. He's just saying the way Christians engage should look different than the world. So, he suggests, for example, that Christians should probably be slower to post on social media and quicker to pray.

"If the apostle James were writing in 2020, he might have considered adding 'posting' in parentheses to James 1:19. Instead of rushing to social media to rage about injustice, police reform, mail-in ballots, or whatever the issue *du jour* might be, what if we turned first to prayer and meditation on Scripture? One way to guard against political idolatry is to let political discourse point us back to the simplicity and sanity of spiritual disciplines—allowing the Word and the Spirit, instead [of] social media and cable news, to guide our responses to the crises of our time."⁹

And hopefully, with God's help, we will maintain the biblical balance that James speaks of, the balance that is so unusual to find embodied in the politics and talking heads of our society. Hopefully, we can be mark-one-through-three people, even if doing so means we don't fit in perfectly with the various groups vying for our attention and enlistment. Hopefully we will be more nuanced and biblically shaped than the world, recognizing, for example, that speaking on social justice doesn't make someone a Marxist any more than praising the policies of a sitting president makes one a racist. Christians should do better than to make such accusations, even if they are levied at us, even from our own. It won't be the first time that Christians don't fit in. And it won't be the last. But as Tim Keller reminds us,

"The Gospel gives us the resources to love people who reject both our beliefs and us personally. Christians should think of how God rescued them. He did it not by taking power but by coming to earth, losing glory and power, serving and dying on a cross. How did Jesus save? Not with a sword but with nails in his hands."¹⁰

Let me offer a denominational example that highlights the importance of listening (mark one). It's no secret that our denomination (Southern Baptist) has something of a checkered past when it comes to racial issues. The denomination came into existence largely because of an insistence that missionaries should not be disqualified for owning slaves. In recent decades, however, you would be hard-pressed to find a denomination that has been more outspoken in the area of race relations and reconciliation than ours. In 2012, Fred Luter became the first African American president of our denomination, which is amazing, given where the denomination began. As Russell Moore said at the time: "A descendent of slaves elected to lead a denomination forged to protect the evil interest of slaveholders is a sign of the power of a gospel that crucifies injustice and reconciles brothers and sisters."¹¹ Amen. And now days, most of the churches planted in our denomination are minority-majority churches.

But this doesn't mean that there are no longer areas of needed improvement. I searched and searched for an old panel discussion I once saw, which I believe took place at one of the recent SBC gatherings, but I couldn't track it down, so my memory is a little fuzzy. Hopefully I remember the facts correctly. Jon Akin was interviewing Walter Strickland and John Onwuchekwa as I recall. And I think it was John Onwuchekwa, who planted a church through NAMB, who pointed out some things that I never realized.

The topic of minority representation in the leadership of the denomination came up. There was some gracious, but shared frustrations on the panel, because in a denomination like ours, with so many minority-majority churches, we might expect there to be greater representation than there actually is. There are various factors as to why there isn't. But it simply won't do to say that people in those churches just need to put in the time and work their way up in the ranks. On paper that sounds good. But in practice, that's not always possible given certain requirements that are in place.

For examples, they mentioned that in order to be considered for certain board positions you have to come from a church that contributes a certain amount or percentage to the convention. That makes sense at first glance, but unfortunately many of these minority-majority churches are made up of people on the poor side of the economic spectrum and in places where the price of ministry (like keeping the lights on in the building) is much higher. So while there may be a desire to contribute more than they do, they often cannot, given the other costs and challenges that they face. Therefore, some of these excellent pastoral candidates are not even eligible to be considered for certain positions.

Another example is related to expectations of missional service. It's reasonable to expect people who are going to represent a mission agency to have some record of service in those mission efforts. But if you are going to participate in some of those short-term mission placements, you're encouraged to self-fund that largely through letters written to your circle and church family. But if you come from a poor family and a poor church, then it becomes much more challenging to raise support and therefore many of those efforts are eventually abandoned. This means, by extension, many wonderful people from the minority-majority churches often are unable to be involved in those efforts or get plugged into leadership.

Now how does that happen? I don't think that happened because there were a bunch of white guys in a room at some denominational meeting who were intentionally trying to keep certain voices from the table. In fact, I sincerely think the people at the table really wanted to see more diversity at the table. But you can almost imagine how those meetings may have gone when they were putting certain procedure in place for people to advance in leadership. They probably were thinking, "It's a mission agency and cooperation is a key part of it, so we need to draw from churches that give at a certain level to the cooperative program, don't you think? Is this percentage reasonable? Okay good. And we should probably require for this position that the person have served in one of these missionary capacities, so they have a sense of what we do and expect, right? Okay write that in..."

There was no malice in it. I'm sure it probably all made sense on paper. But because there may not have been voices from some of these communities at the table, inadvertently the deck was stacked against certain people, let's say, for example, a person of color, serving in a minority context, in an urban setting, among the economically poor. That wasn't the intention. But it happened, nevertheless. And it could have been avoided if there was more listening (mark one) happening on the front end. I like to think we are a denomination that takes the Word of God serious enough that when these oversights are brought to the fore we will reform accordingly. But we won't ever notice these blind spots unless we are slow to speak and quick to listen.

Now let me shift to a congregational level. Individual churches are likewise pulled in various directions. Some churches seem to really emphasize their mercy ministries, but their theology is pretty suspect. Other churches seem to really taut their theological orthodoxy, but they're pretty disengaged from their community and the needy around them go unserved. In other words, some seem inclined toward mark two and others toward mark three. But James reminds us that we can't pick and choose. We are to be a people of "declaration and demonstration."¹² We should be about both because the Gospel has implications for both. And this is why it is so important for us to listen (mark one) to the Gospel.

Our purpose statement as a church goes like this:

We exist to glorify God through Gospel-Transformed lives...

And how do we pursue that?

We do this by actively embracing "3 GCs": Gospel-Centrality, the Great Commission, and the Great Commandments.

I believe these points of emphasis, when rightly understood, can help us keep the balance that James is speaking of. When we are serious about the Gospel—the good news that Christ died to save sinners from condemnation they deserved—it shapes the way we look at the world and the way we minister in the world. We want to extend that grace to people because God has extended grace to us. Justice is important to us because the cross proves that justice is important to God. And all of our ministry should have a cruciform shape and be connected to our proclamation of the cross.

The Great Commission is our mission as a church. And part of fulfilling that command to make disciples involves teaching others to obey everything that Jesus commands. Not just some things. Not just our pet issues. Everything that is important to our Lord should be important to us.

And the Great Commandments remind us that we are called to love God and our neighbor. As we saw last week these are connected. The latter can evidence the former. We cannot just be about orthodoxy (right belief). We must also be about orthopraxy (right practice). We cannot settle for checking all the right doctrinal boxes, but not rolling up our sleeves and serving our neighbor. We care about both. How we love our neighbor may take different forms in each of our lives, but it should be an important part of all of our lives.

In short, I think these GCs help us get at the balance that James speaks of. And if we can *actively* embrace them together, then I hope we will be a people increasingly reminiscent of what is described in James 1:26 and 27. A people who control their mouths. A people who care for their margins. And a people who adopt a biblical and therefore countercultural set of morals.

God help us...

Let's pray...

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 84.

² David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in James* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 29. Similarly, see Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 95.

³ Robert L. Plummer, "James" in *Hebrews-Revelation* (ESVEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 241. Sam Allberry argues that there is a connection between this instruction and the one that comes before it: "We might think of any number of ways in which the culture of the world around us is pushing in an opposite direction to the way that God has called us to live. But it is likely James has a particular form of pollution in mind. In the Greek, there is no 'and' between these two characteristics of true religion. The verse literally reads: 'to look after orphans and widows in their distress, to keep oneself from being polluted by the world'. So the pollution James has in his mind is primarily economic exploitation and indifference. That James follows 1:27 with an immediate example of economic favoritism (2:1–13) further suggests this is the particular form of pollution he has in mind." Sam Allberry, *James For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 54.

⁴ Cf. James 4:4; Ephesians 2:2; Colossians 2:8; Titus 2:12; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 2:14-15.

⁵ Daniel M. Doriani, *James* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 60.

⁶ Hughes, 85.

⁷ Eugene Park, "Are Christians More Confident in Politics Than in Christ?", accessed online as of the date of preaching at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/confident-politics/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't", accessed online as of the date of preaching at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html?smid=fb-share&fbclid=IwAR2Z9X3AlNnwFZDomgrKNAaSNACxAYU7xrBSEu9Fpfoypgi5mhKDyzLPF8>.

¹¹ As quoted in John M. Perkins, *One Blood: Parting Words to the Church on Race* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 55.

¹² DeYoung and Gilbert, 223.