

PURE RELIGION

Text: James 1:18-27

INTRODUCTION:

1. Worldly people often use the word *religion* in a positive way, but in Scripture, the word *religion* is seldom used in a positive way.
2. For example, there was an article in today's paper about a woman murdered getting out of her car in Sheepshead Bay yesterday.
3. They interviewed her neighbors, and one man said, "She was a very quiet person, very religious, always very well dressed coming back and forth from the shul (a Yiddish word for synagogue)."
4. Sadly, it is a fact that most religious people are lost and on their way to hell.
5. According to the Bible, religious people are usually lost people who are trying to please God with their good works. Or by going to shul, or church, or the mosque, or the Kingdom Hall, etc.
6. Remember our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18. The self-righteous Pharisee prayed "with himself," indicating he was not really praying to God.
7. He prayed, "God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess" (Luke 18:11, 12).
8. This sounds more like bragging, than praying.
9. The *Scofield Bible* says: "Excepting James 1:27, 'religion' has always a bad sense, and nowhere is it synonymous with salvation or spirituality."
10. Before God saved him, the apostle Paul was very religious. He was persecuting Christians because he was religious.
11. He said in Acts 26:4, 5, "My manner of life from my youth, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews; Which knew me from the beginning, if they would testify, that after the most straitest (strictest) sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee."
12. Paul writes in Galatians 1:13, 14, "For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers."
13. Strictly speaking, *religion* simply means "a system of faith and practice." It is in this sense of the word that James uses the word *religion* (cf. James 1:27).
14. James uses the word in a positive way. To James, "pure religion" (1:27) means genuine faith in Christ.

15. When James speaks of "pure religion" (1:27), he is referring to "true religion." We often like to point out that, strictly speaking, Christianity is not a religion but a *relationship* with a *person*, namely the Lord Jesus Christ, who is alive.

I. PURE RELIGION IS IN ACCORDANCE WITH GOD'S PERFECT WILL (1:18)

1. Note the phrase, "of his own will" in James 1:18. We see the same phrase in Ephesians 1:11, "In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."
2. The apostle Paul says we were "predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."
3. It was God's will that we were saved. Second Peter 3:9 says it is not God's will "that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."
4. There are many religious people – even many who claim to be Christian – who have never been saved. In fact, if you ask them about salvation, they usually admit they are not sure what you are talking about.
5. When I am witnessing to someone, and trying to get him saved, I do not ask, "Are you religious?" There is no need for that.
6. But I might ask them if they are born again.
7. Because true religion, what James refers to as "pure religion" in verse 27, is based upon salvation. And to be a true Christian, one has to be born again -- "Of his own will begat he us" (1:18).
8. The Word of God, or "the word of truth" (1:18), is the instrument of the new birth (1:18).
9. First Peter 1:23 says, "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever."
10. James says that God regenerated us, He saved us, "that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (1:18b). Firstfruits are the first part of the crop, and are the intimation that a greater harvest will follow.
11. Perhaps James is calling his readers "a kind of firstfruits" because there would be a greater harvest to come as a result of subsequent missionary endeavors. The book of James is generally considered to be the first epistle.

II. PURE RELIGION IS BASED UPON THE WORD OF GOD (1:22)

1. The Word of God, or "the word of truth" (1:18), is the instrument of the new birth (1:18). Scripture is referred to as "the engrafted word" (1:21, 22, 23) and "the perfect law of liberty" (1:25).

2. Unfortunately, you can walk into any number of churches and sit through the service and hear very little, if any, Scripture. But true religion must be based upon the Word of God.
3. One of our members was traveling, and he told me he heard very little Bible exposition in the churches he visited.
4. Amos 8:11 says, "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord GOD, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD."
5. Sounds like America today.
6. James likens the Word of God to a seed that takes root in our hearts – it is the "engrafted word" (1:21b); it is the living Word.
7. It is not enough to just listen to the Word of God, we must also obey it (1:22). There are certain people that know the Scriptures, but they do not obey the Scriptures.
8. To go on gaining intellectual knowledge of the Bible without obeying it can be very dangerous. Some church members have an a lot of knowledge of the Bible, but they are not putting into practice what they have learned.
9. One preacher said: "If we continually learn what we ought to do, but do not do it, we become depressed, frustrated, and callous. Impression without expression leads to depression" (William MacDonald).
10. Those who hear the Word of God but do not change their behaviour are like the man who beholds his face in the mirror and then forgets what he saw (1:23, 24).
11. What good is it to wake up and look in the mirror, and then walk away without cleaning up? James says many people are like that with the Word of God.
12. A man derives no benefit from the mirror if he goes his way and forgetteth what manner of man he was (1:24). The message is this: to hear the Word of God and not to obey it leads to folly and delusion.
13. There are many metaphors and symbols in the Bible that represent the Word of God – the Bible is a light; the Bible is a hammer; the Bible is a sharp, two-edged sword, and so on. And James compares the word of God to a mirror.
14. Many years ago, some city folk asked this hillbilly if they could camp out on his property for a few days. He gave his permission, they gave him a few dollars, and then set up their tent. After a few days, they left and the hillbilly went up into the hills to clean up. While cleaning up he found a mirror that they had accidentally left behind. He had never seen a mirror before, and so he thought to himself: "I never knew Daddy had his picture took!" He was so excited about finding what he thought was a picture of his father that he

ran back to his cabin and put the mirror in his drawer. A while later, his wife was cleaning out the drawers and found the mirror. She looked at the mirror and said, "So that's the old hag my husband's been running around with!"

15. It's easy to read the Word of God and think it is speaking to someone else. But when we pick it up and read it God is speaking to us. The Bible is an accurate mirror, showing us our imperfections and our shortcomings; not a photograph of someone else's imperfections and shortcomings.

III. PURE RELIGION WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE FOR THE BETTER (1:26, 27)

1. Any religion can change your life; but only true Christianity can change it for the better. There are many people who join religious cults, and their lives have certainly changed – but not for the better. People trapped in these cults know nothing about the grace of God, nothing about repentance, or salvation or the new birth.
2. The epistle of James has been called "the gospel in shoe leather."
3. W.A. Criswell said the book of James "is not metaphysical, or philosophical, or theological, or speculative. His letter is very pragmatic, experiential, down-to-earth."
4. In other words, the book of James is very practical. It gives much practical instruction on what James calls "pure religion." This epistle sets forth the practical righteousness which should characterize those who are truly born again.
5. We are to be "swift to hear" (1:19). This means we should be teachable. Unfortunately, many people are not very teachable.
6. We are to be "slow to speak" (1:19). James has much to say about our speech in this little epistle (cf. 1:26; 3:8).
7. As Christians, we are to be guarded in our conversation. I remember back a few years ago when I was working on a construction job. I was having lunch in a diner with a few co-workers and the foreman. The foreman let out a few dirty words during lunch, and later on during the conversation I mentioned that I was a Baptist preacher. His face turned red and he admitted that he was a born-again believer.
8. James says: "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak" (1:19). There was a first-century Greek philosopher named Epictetus, who said these words: "Nature has given to man one tongue, but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak."
9. Proverbs 10:19 says, "In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise."

10. Proverbs 13:3 says, "He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction."
11. I remember when I was a child, the teacher made me write on the blackboard these words (I think they were from Abraham Lincoln): "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."
"A wise old owl lived in an oak.
The more he knew, the less he spoke;
The less he spoke, the more he knew;
And this same thing applies to you."
12. Not only are we to be swift to hear and slow to speak, James also says, "slow to wrath" (1:19b, 20). Proverbs 16:32 says, "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city."
13. Anger and bitterness will not produce the patient endurance God is seeking to work out in our lives (1:20).
14. Those of us who are saved are to "lay apart all filthiness" (1:21). The idea here is to lay it aside like you would lay aside some filthy, soiled garments. I like the way Elisha A. Hoffman put it in his great hymn, "Are You Washed in the Blood?"
*Lay aside the garments that are stained with sin,
And be washed in the blood of the Lamb.*
15. We are not only to lay apart "all filthiness," i.e., impurity and vile lusts and evil passions, we are also to put away "superfluity of naughtiness" (1:21). The word *naughtiness* has changed somewhat since the KJV was translated in 1611. It originally conveyed the idea of wickedness.
16. The word *superfluity* means literally "overflow" or "surplus," perhaps referring to the abundance of wickedness that is still around from the days before we were saved. Old worldly habits die hard.
17. The Christian life is both negative and positive – there are some things that we must not do – wrathful speech, filthiness, naughtiness, etc., and some things that we must do – "receive with meekness the engrafted word" (1:21b).
18. One man said to a pastor: "I've been through the Bible and it hasn't done anything for me." The preacher wisely replied: "Next time, instead of going through the Bible, let the Bible go through you."
19. To learn anything from the Bible we must be humble and submissive to God's will. Isaiah 66:2 says, "But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word."
20. Otherwise, we are in danger of deceiving ourselves (1:22).

21. Before concluding this message on "Pure Religion," let us look once more at the reference to religion that we started off with (1:27).
22. Pure religion will result in a godly lifestyle, and James mentions concern for the fatherless and widows in their affliction (1:27).
23. Pure religion also involves keeping oneself "unspotted from the world" (1:27; cf. 4:4).
24. Some professed Christians are so worldly that they do not see how badly "spotted" they have become – spotted from worldly associations, worldly amusements, worldly music, worldly dress, and so on.

CONCLUSION:

1. I read a humorous story that I will pass on to you. An elderly man, very nearsighted, fancied himself a great art critic. He loved to go to the different art galleries and museums and give his opinions of the different paintings.
2. One day he and some friends went to an art museum and as usual he immediately began to give his criticisms of the various paintings.
3. Stopping before what he thought was a full-length portrait, he began to critique it. He was very nearsighted and had left his glasses at home. Therefore, he could not see the picture clearly.
4. With an air of superiority he said: "The frame is very nice but is altogether out of keeping with the picture. The man in this portrait is too homely and is shabbily dressed. In fact, he is quite ugly – it was a mistake for the artist to select such a shoddy subject for this portrait."
5. At this point, his wife grabbed his arm and pulled him aside and said: "My dear, you are looking in a mirror!"
6. That's the way many of us are when it comes to the Word of God (1:22-24).