

If you have your Bibles, turn to James chapter one. We're going to be looking at verses 26 and 27. *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.*

I think these couple of verses are the very theme of the book of James. He's getting to the essence of what he's trying to communicate. We see here at the end of chapter one, he's really repeating everything he's already said. He's introduced this topic at the beginning of chapter one. In fact, if you look at verses 19 to 21, we looked at that just a few weeks ago, you can outline it in the same basic structure. *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

Basically, he's given us three things here that this book is about. And he's summarizing these three things as what characterizes true religion. What are the true marks of true Christianity. And he's contrasting those who claim to be religious - you who think you're religious. You who, in our day it would be "spiritual". You who think you're spiritual. "I'm a spiritual person." Let's evaluate your spirituality, your religion, your devotion by looking at three areas of your life.

You'd think if you were writing this it would be dealing with something more important like your knowledge of God. Do you know God? Or your theological awareness of God. How theologically astute you are. Or maybe your devotion and prayer life. Do you know God? Do you pray to God? And you see, I think he doesn't hammer these things, not because they're not important. It's easy for us to say "hey, I'm religious. I'm spiritual. I pray. I read my bible." And even "I go to church." It's easy for us to fulfill certain things and these things are hard to evaluate in other people. It's hard to see if we really true God.

How do you know if you love God? That's a heart issue and you can't evaluate that. Like faith. You say you have faith, let me see your works. Well, you say you have love. You love God. Well, how do I know you love God? Do you love orphans and widows? You say you're religious and have a prayer life and go to church, but are you gossiping? You claim to be spiritual, but are you holy? Are you keeping yourself unstained and unpolluted by the world?

He gets into very practical things that can be measured and evaluated. This is true Christianity. This is true religion. It's going to have an actual outcome in these practical ways. In fact, I would say it's harder to love orphans and widows than it is sometimes to even claim that we love God. You can read your Bible regularly, but does it mean you're not a gossip or slanderer with your words? This is real Christianity 101 and it's not to minimize personal devotion. It's not to minimize "let me see your faith by works". It's not to minimize faith. It's not to minimize love for God. It's not to minimize knowledge of God and sitting in the presence of God.

I think there are two types of errors that we want to go on. One side of the street is to say, "Hey, I just want to spend time with the Lord and I want to devote myself to Christ and stay in my little

house. I don't want to mix and mingle with people. I just want to spend time with the Lord." That's one error. The other one is Christianity is nothing but outward works and there's no love for Christ, no love for God, no private devotion, no scripture reading, no going to church, no real seeking to know God.

We don't want to push one to the expense of the other, but I think what James is dealing with, he's addressing the people who are claiming to be religious. Claiming to be Christians but they're outward walk is coming up short. They're boasting in their religion but some of the basic activities of the Christian life they're failing to do. So, we need to make sure as we claim Christ as our Lord, we claim to be religious and Christians, we claim to be spiritual people, are we doing these three things? These external things? These three activities?

According to James, these are the marks of true religion. He's going to contrast worthless religion, religion that is worthless, with religion that is pure and undefiled before God. So what is the religion that won't do you any good? And the religion that God says, "This is good. This is pure. In the eyes of God, this is acceptable." We all want that. We all want to be religious. We all want to be true Christians and live it out in our daily lives.

Here are three things we need to focus on. Three things that are difficult to do even for seasoned saints. They are: self control, charity, and purity. Trust me, I worked hard to find a word that rhymed with charity and purity but there's not one. So we're just going to go with self control. I'd rather be clear than be charming.

The first one is self control. We have to have self control. The Christian life incorporates discipline. There's no Christian life without mortification. And I know it's easy for us to go "well, for Christians we have a new heart and a new nature and Christianity just comes easy to true believers." There is a sense that if you're born again you cannot live in sin and you have a new aptitude and desire to live for God. But it doesn't necessarily mean that Christianity and living the Christian life and obedience always comes easy for us. I don't think we truly understand the Law if we say, "Hey, now that I'm a Christian, obedience is easy." Obedience is hard at times. It's hard and can be very difficult.

In fact, the Apostle Paul says, "I subject my body and bring it into subjection. I turn my fists and rather than beating the air aimlessly, I turn my fists inwardly and I beat myself. I discipline my own body. I discipline my own appetites, my desires. I bring my body into subjection. I'm not just allowing my body to run over me, the desires of the body. I don't just sleep in until I want to get up. I discipline myself. I discipline myself when it comes to Bible reading. I discipline myself when it comes to prayer. I discipline myself in the areas of the Christian life." And without discipline and self control, there's no sanctification.

This is very much a part of true religion. Mortification. Putting to death the deeds of the flesh. But James is going to focus on one part of the body that is a little more difficult to control than the other parts of the body and that's the tongue. You can recognize that he's going to have

almost a whole chapter on this. He's kind of introducing everything he's going to talk about later and if you're not controlling your speech, don't think you're religious. You're self deceived.

In chapter three, he's going to lay out the importance of taming the tongue and putting a bridle on that little bitty muscle in your mouth. So he's introducing that topic here. And he's like, 'It's easier to control almost everything else. Control your feet or your hands.' When's the last time you hit someone, if you're over ten? I mean, you're not necessarily prone to hit someone. You may want to every now and then. But when's the last time you lashed out at someone? Even good Christians fail here with the tongue.

We may not have a desire to hit someone or we may not do that often, but our speech, now that is something a little more difficult to do. It's easy to stretch the truth. It's easy to have little white lies. Small ones. It's easy to exaggerate. To puff ourselves up. It's easy to slander people. It's easy to curse. The Bible says *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths* (Ephesians 4:29). There are some Christians that say it's okay to use cuss words. Here are the words of the Apostle Paul: *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.* (Ephesians 4:29-30a)

Don't let corrupt things come out of your mouth. There are cuss words, right? There are words that we should not utter. Things that are not wholesome. Things that are not decent. These things we should not think about. We definitely shouldn't talk about. But more than that, we need to be careful that we don't use the Lord's name in vain. We are to hallow the Lord's name. We're to treat God with respect. We're not to even come close to try to bring God down by using His name or things that refer to Him in a casual way. Even if we put it in text messages and just use the "omg" language. It's not good.

It's easy to gossip, isn't it? Gossip comes easy for us because we like to hear it. Proverbs 16: 28 says, *A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer (that is, gossip) separates close friends.* Proverbs 16:27, *A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.* These are worthless people. They're not religious. They are looking for flaws. They're seeking it out. They're digging it out. They want to find a little nugget to grab hold of and then they're going to use it to set a fire. They're going to use that negative information to hurt someone and bring themselves to light. If you enjoy other people's problems... This is not a religious activity. This is not wholesome to delight in people's sin and to take joy in spreading it.

Love conceals. We should seek to conceal people's flaws, not display them. Even for our enemies. Even our enemies, we're not to gloat in the things that would bring them dishonor. We're to seek to minimize that in our own minds and especially in spreading it to others. Proverbs 26:20 says, *Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down.* You know, people are fighting and churches feud. Why are churches feuding? It's because there's gossiping going on. This group is talking about that group, and this person is talking about that person. "Have you heard? Have you heard? Did you know? Did you listen to this?" And then our ears perk up. "Do tell!"

We like hearing negative things because it gives us a sense of superiority. There's a pride in us. We like hearing it. We like spreading it and it's not right. We're to take away the wood from the fire so the division would cease. It says, *A quarrelsome person fuels a dispute. Words of a gossip are swallowed readily and they go down to the person's innermost being* (Proverbs 26:22). Here it says in verse 26, *If anyone thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* We have to hold back gossiping.

Fourth. It's easy to complain with our words. This is the sin of Israel. When they came out of Egypt, they grumbled. They complained over and over and over. It's the same word that talks about how it's better to live in a housetop than with a quarrelsome woman. The woman's always just complaining and griping. That is a great sin of not controlling the mouth. The Bible tells in Philippians 2:14 to do all things without complaining or grumbling and disputing. Do all things without complaining. I fail at this. I'm reading that verse and I'm thinking about myself. Just to be honest with you, I was sweeping the floor this morning going, "How does this stuff get on the floor? I just swept it yesterday. Where does this stuff come from?" It was just like a little frustration. An irritation of doing a good deed but doing it with an unhappy heart. I have a great floor to sweep. It's got a lot of crumbs on it for certain.

But we grumble. We find things that we should be so thankful for but it's just not right. Our car, it's got that squeak. "I'm not going to be happy until it's fixed." We're complaining about this or that. We complain and we grumble. We're unhappy. We're dissatisfied. It's sins of the tongue. It's us not bridling the tongue. It's wrong. It's easy to sin with our mouths.

I think he's talking about this because obviously James can't see the heart. He's dealing with external things. "You show me your faith by your works. Let's see your life." We obviously need to keep this away from our thinking. We need to have gratefulness in our heart, not bitterness. But this is what comes out and this is what people will evaluate us by. Ultimately, God's looking at us. It's easy to sin with our mouths.

One of the most difficult parts of the body to control. But we need to see here that if we're not able to control our tongues, we're self deceived. You say, "Jeff, I go to church. I've memorized the book of James." Yes, you've memorized it now let's do it. It's not merely just going to church. It's not just merely praying. I'm not minimizing that. Pray, pray, and pray more. We all need to pray more. We all need to read our Bible more. We all need God more. We need to know God more. But let it come out in the way we control our tongue.

Psalms 34:13, *Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceitful speech.* Psalm 39:1, *I will watch my ways so that I will not sin with my tongue. I will guard my mouth with a muzzle as long as the wicked are present.* That's why it's better to be slow to speak. It's better to not say much at all if you're careless with your words and you're just saying things impulsively without thought. Think about what you're going to say. Control it and often stop from saying it.

Often, when I'm preaching, I have all these weird things that come through my mind. Sometimes they slip out. But I have to think to myself, "Do people need to hear that just because I'm thinking it?" It takes discipline to sort through what you say. And you do that by sorting through your thoughts. Guarding your tongue. Psalms 141:3, *Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!* Put a zipper on it. Put a lock and key and then when you say something, be purposeful in what you say. Intentional in what you say. We're deceived if we can't do this. We're deceived. Our religion is worthless if we're not guarding our speech. This is what it says. *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart.*

Here is what's happening: you're using your religion against yourself. You're using your religious activities as a means of self-deception. You're saying, "I'm good here." It leads to pride. It leads to, "I've got confidence. Look at my life. I'm religious." And so that's often the way we excuse our sins. We find something that we're good at, maybe a little bit better than other people at, and we go, "I excel in this area but it's okay that I fail over here. It's a small thing and what I'm good at is big. It's important. I'm a pastor. I'm a missionary. I'm a great man of God or a great woman of God. I do this, this, and this." But you don't bridle your tongue. You're deceiving yourself. Bridling your tongue and controlling your speech is Christianity 101. That's where it begins.

It deceives ourselves. We're self-deceived. Then it says this type of religion is of no value. It's worthless. If it can't help you tame your tongue, then what good is it? What good is it if it doesn't help you have self-control and discipline in your speech? This is true Christianity. True religion. It's self-control. That's the first mark.

There's another mark. It goes on to say in verse 27 that charity is the mark of true religion. After talking about what religion is not, what worthless religion is, now he's going to give us what true religion that is pure and undefiled before God is. Verse 27, *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.* He could've just said love your neighbor as yourself. Again, this is not talking about a love for God. That's something that we can all say we do even if we don't. Love of God will lead you to love your neighbor and loving your neighbor will be exemplified and manifested by how we treat others. I think James is going to pick on a particular class of people (orphans and widows) as an example. This isn't meant to be this is the only people we love or this is the only people we visit, but this is using them as an example of what loving our neighbors looks like.

Here, apparently, these Jews that James is writing to had a problem with showing partiality with a rich person coming into their congregation. They're showing favoritism. They're going to welcome the wealthy into the church and give them prominent seats and be kind and be extra hospitable towards them, but if a poor person comes in, they're going to neglect them. James is thinking about who are the people we are to love that have hardly anything that they can give us in return. Not just the poor but here are the widows. Here are the orphans. They're needy. They need us. They're not just poor, they're dependent. In this day and age, the widows didn't have any source of income. Widows and orphans are in the same class. They had no source of

income. They're completely dependent upon charity. Dependent upon others. Dependent upon the church to take care of them. That's who we're to love.

Jesus put it this way in Luke 14, *When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just* (Luke 14:12-14). But this is the concept of visiting orphans and widows in their distress. Jesus says in Luke 6:34, *And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.* True religion will lead us to have compassion and concern and charity towards those we know can never repay us. Never return the favor. This is what true love looks like. It's the giving of oneself expecting nothing in return.

The idea behind the word charity, which we translate as love, is to have self-sacrifice. It's a desire and compassion for someone for their betterment at our own expense. This is what true love looks like. This is what true Christianity looks like. To minister to those who are in true need. I want you to think for a moment. You don't have to be a missionary going to Africa or Latin America. You don't have to be a pastor to have this type of ministry. This is the ministry that we're all called to. This is the ministry for you and for myself. This is something we can do is to look for those who are in true need and say, "Does my heart go out to them and can I help them? Can I serve them? Can I give to them?" This is the stuff that goes unnoticed by the world. This is true religion.

It's easy to go, "Hey, where's the next big conference and I'd love to go speak at that. I'd love to do that. Send me somewhere cool. Send me overseas. Maybe a biography would be written about me one day." How many people noticed when you went to the hospital? Did they write it down when you visited someone that was sick? When you went into the nursing home last week and you just sat with someone for a while. Maybe you read the Bible for ten minutes and prayed with them. Maybe just listened with the TV on in the background and you just sat there. You didn't do anything but you were there. That is great religion. That is pure religion. That is something God sees and goes, "Now, mark that woman. Mark that man. That is real."

I'm not saying it's wrong to be a missionary or a speaker. But this here is something God is putting an important highlight on. Something that you give but you have nothing to receive in so doing. You can't maintain such a ministry if you don't truly love people. Selfishness will not allow you to keep serving in such capacities without making a show of it and getting some attention out of it. Or you really, truly love people. The only thing that'll keep you visiting orphans, widows, sick people, and those in distress. Reaching out to those that have nothing to return to you. The only thing that will allow you to do that is if you truly are religious. You truly are born again. You truly do have love in your heart. Nothing to gain for such actions.

Brothers and sisters, this is something we all can do. Do you know the nursing homes are now open? We don't have the excuse to say, "I don't have the COVID shot, I just can't go." No,

they're open now. You can go. You can go to the nursing homes and we have people in our church that are in a nursing home. There are people to see. There are people in the nursing home that do not have any visitors. I like this because this doesn't say go to the orphans and widows and pass out money. It just says visit. Sit with. Just go and be in the presence of someone. Give your time and show that you care. That there is a wonderful act of love. That's true charity. You say, "I don't know what to say." You don't have to say anything. Just go sit. Just go be with them. Go visit them. This is a mark of true religion.

There's one more mark. Purity. Or holiness. We see this at the end of verse 27. It's not just visiting orphans and widows in their distress. It's keeping oneself unstained from the world. 1 Peter 1:16 says you're to be holy *since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."* Charles Spurgeon, when talking about these two marks said, "Charity without purity will be of no avail. In vain should we give all our substance to the poor and give our bodies to be burned if we do not walk in the way of holiness without which no man shall see the Lord. If we do not come out from the world and keep ourselves from its polluting influence, we have not yet learned what pure and undefiled religion really is. We may be very orthodox in creed and we may be very advanced in our knowledge of religious matters. We think ourselves to be Hebrews of the Hebrews. Pharisees of the Pharisees and touching the righteousness which is of the law, blameless. But in the sight of God we are only a sounding brass, a tinkling cymbal unless, by divine grace, we have learned to keep ourselves unspotted from the world."

This is what holiness and purity means. It means to be separate from the world. Imagine you're wearing a brand new pair of white shoes on a rainy day. Brand new. And you want to keep those shoes in mint condition. You want to wear them but you're afraid of the mud splashing on it. You don't want the world to stain it and spot-up your new shoes. In the same way, we are in the world but not of it and we're called to live in a way that we're not polluted and stained by the world. This means we're to be separate and not like the world. We're to be different. I think this includes two major concepts to be holy. One, it means to refrain from the corruptions and sins of the world. The world is living in a certain manner. The world gossips, lies, cheats, and steals. The world is prideful, arrogant, and cut-throat. Every man for themselves. This is the way of the world. We're not to live that way. We're to be unspotted from the ways of the world and be pure and come out from them.

It doesn't mean that we go and live in the desert and isolate ourselves. No, we're in the world but we're not of it. We have to go out on the rainy day with our new shoes. We have to go. We have to live in this world. The way to be holy is not escaping the world, it's just to keep ourselves pure in this unholy world. It's a fight.

It also means that we're not to get overly involved in the entanglements of this world. The cares of this world. Remember the seed that grew up and the thorns choked it out? The reason, Jesus explained, the thorns that choked out the word is the cares and concerns of this world. Sometimes good things pollute you. You don't think of it that way. You say, "I'm not lying. I'm not cheating. I'm being honest with my business dealings." But you're so preoccupied with the cares of this world. With the concerns of this world.

You've got one business adventure after another. And there are so many wonderful opportunities. It's hard to say no to them. "I can't do that. I can't say no because this is a once in a life opportunity. I've got to do it." And the next day there's another once in a life opportunity and it's always something and then there's something else and something else. Before long, you're so busy and caught up with the world. You don't realize it, but you've become worldly minded. Your heart's not focused upon God. Your mind's focused upon the things of the world. Your mind is taken off what really matters. And you're polluted. YOU're polluted with good things, not just sin.

It's not just adultery and all the evil sexual sins that we all look down on, which we should look down upon and run from and say, "That's evil. I don't want anything to do with that. I don't want to look at that. I don't want to touch that." Maybe you're doing a good job there. Maybe we're good at keeping ourselves pure in that way, but we don't realize the world is keeping up with us in other areas of our lives and we become distracted by it and we end up loving this world. We're told that this world is not our home. We're told that we're to have a proper view of this world. We have to be able to let it go. I'm convinced that constantly our heart has a little fist that wants to grab hold of things. And if your heart has its fist around something, you need to put the knife to the heart and crucify it and say, "Let go. Let go of that." You don't have to have that. If God wants to give it to you, that's fine. You can enjoy it. It's not wrong. It's not sinful. If you want that investment and it's wise and you can manage your time and it's not distracting and it's not detrimental to your family, your children, your spiritual walk. If all that is in the proper place, then you can enjoy that for the glory of God, do it. But if you can't, say no to it. It's distracting.

Sometimes it's okay to take a decrease. Sometimes it's okay to set stuff aside and make less money if necessary so that you're not, without even being aware of it, spotted up and stained by the world. By the love of it. We're called as Christians and true religion will cause us to forsake this world and not love this world or the things of the world. To be able to have loose hands and say, "You can have it, Lord. If You want that, I'll give it to You. You want that, You can have that. You can have everything. The only thing You can't have is Jesus. That's the only thing I won't give up. That's the only thing I won't part with. I'm going to wrap my arms so tightly around the Christ, You can't have Him. You can't take Him from me. I have to have Him. But everything else You can have freely. I give it up. I let it go." That's real religion.

This is why he ends contrasting the worthless religion and using it as worthless, useless... If you've got all these religious duties and activities but it doesn't lead you to tame your tongue and be giving and charitable to orphans and widows and those in distress, it doesn't lead you to seek holiness and purity, your religion is useless. But if your religion does do these things, it's pure. God-approved. It's undefiled. It's religion that God looks at and goes, "I like that." Religion has a bad name because religious people have given religion a bad name. But this religion has a good name in the eyes of God. Let us demonstrate what true religion is by the way we act and conduct ourselves.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.



Dear Lord, we are so thankful for the instructions You give us in Your word. How nourishing Your word is to us. Lord, we see these three things and we say we want to do them. We want real religion. Religion that's undefiled and pure before Your eyes, not the religion of the world that's worthless. That's useless. That doesn't change people's souls and lives. We want the religion that makes us different. That transforms us from the inside out and can be visible in the way we talk and the way we give and the way we keep ourselves clean in this evil world. This we pray in Your Son's name. Amen.