

James 1 (26) – The Test of the Tongue

Authenticity; it is a real concern for most people when it comes to having, knowing, or trusting something or someone. I am thankful for the fact that many people seem very concerned with authenticity when it comes to religion. Of course there are many who want authenticity as far as what to believe, but they don't really seem to care about living in accordance with that authenticity in an authentic way. I guess we are all guilty of that at times.

God is completely concerned about authenticity, too, and the Bible gives us many encouragements, exhortations, and warnings about living for the glory of God vs. being deceived and living for the satisfaction of self. 2 Corinthians 5:15 tells it like it is – Jesus died for us so that we would live for Him. Authentic Christians will live authentic lives as a pattern.

Yes, Christians can think and act hypocritically. Everyone is a hypocrite at some point. But we can either be a hypocrite saved by the grace of God or a hypocrite in contempt of the grace of God. As Christians, we acknowledge that we are hypocritical in word and deed at times, and we acknowledge that we cannot be perfect. This is why we don't point to ourselves as models of perfection, but point to Christ as the only perfection. However, when it comes to living the truth, true Christians display an ongoing attempt, instead of displaying an ongoing contempt.

In vs.18-25, James talks about responding to truth. He encourages his readers to “receive the word which was implanted in you with meekness” (vs.21) and then expands this exhortation by showing that the true receiving of God's Word involves doing it (vs.22-27). A new birth means a new life, and James used an illustration in vs.22-25 to compare a life of self-deception with the kind of life that God blesses. Now in vs.26-27, he gives us some tests that will reveal what kind of religion we have. These illustrations used in vs.26-27 are not exhaustive but strategic, capturing the spirit (essence) of religion that is false and religion that is true. Using the language of vs.22-25, we see that vs.26 describes the hearer, vs.27 describes the doer.

In vs.26, James is not talking about Christianity versus other religions; he is speaking about those who say they are Christians, and think they are Christians, but are not. These are the mere hearers he has been talking about, compared with the real doers. There are a lot of people who think they are “doers” because they “do” a lot of things, but they are not doers in the sense that James means. A doer is someone whose character is being conformed to the image of Christ. We are not only sinners saved by grace; we are saints being changed by grace. Doers are receiving the maturity, endurance, wisdom and godly quality of life the Word is meant to produce.

Vs.26 is the kind of text that is meant to challenge all of us, and after this message, if you don't think you have any repenting to do, then you definitely have some repenting to do. We are going to look at this test of authenticity, and discover 1) who is included in this test 2) what is the issue of this test 3) what is the intention of this test, and finally, 4) what is the indication of this test.

Who is Included in this Test? All professing Christians (*If anyone thinks he is religious*). This is about people who claim to be Christians. If you don't even confess to be a Christian before others then of course you aren't a Christian. And someone could “pass” this test in a sense and still not be a Christian because they aren't a believer. But this test includes anyone that says or

thinks they are a Christian. Anyone means anyone, regardless of social, economic, or religious status, pastor, teacher, minister, deacon, or whether they are new to the faith, or a long time believer, anyone who claims the name of Christ is included in this test. That means you and me.

This test is about self-deception, not the evaluation of others. Often we are self-confident when we are actually self-deceived. Our type of “doing” is not Christlike living. The term “religious” is about “being concerned with scrupulous details”. It is talking about worship. James is speaking of (1) people who trust in rituals and/or rules or (2) people who trust in knowledge, but neither of whom are living godly lives. James is not talking about false religion in the sense of other belief systems, but about those who only have a semblance of being real but it is just on the surface, it has no depth to the heart, it is a veneer and the inside is actually empty.

This person thinks that they are right with God, and that their life demonstrates that they are a saved person. So the text is saying, “Someone may claim the name of Christ and really believe that they are serving and worshipping God in truth, but if their religious activity is primarily about being cerebral, performing ceremony, or keeping codes, and they aren’t maturing in Christlike character, their religion is vain, empty, and worthless”. Many people think that just by coming to church that the work in their soul is done automatically, that they have “done their duty”, with no real action in their heart or outside of church. This is empty religion, uninvolved and impersonal spirituality. James uses the tongue as the test of truth.

What is the Issue of this Test? Our words (*and does not bridle his tongue*). Why is this type of sin singled out as being an indicator of worthless religion? The particular emphasis on the sins of the tongue is because of the importance of our words in revealing our true condition (cf. Luke 6:45). The heart is a metaphorical way of referring to the entire person, the mind, will, and emotions. There is much more that could be said about what constitutes worthless religion, but the emphasis on our tongue captures the essence of empty religion.

Our communication is a major issue in James (cf. 1:19, 3:2-12). Self-control is a sign of Christian maturity (cf. Galatians 5:22-23). Unfortunately belief (orthodoxy) without practice (orthopraxy) is common. This is an empty show, and empty religion that is all talk and no action, or all action but no heart, can be a barrier to God (cf. Romans 9:30-32). Just hearing without doing is worthless (cf. Ezekiel 33:30-32) – it is just going through the motions, but neglecting righteousness. Just doing without actually changing is no better.

The tongue gives credible evidence as to what is going on inside us. Think of it like a taking an opinion poll or a research project. The bigger the sample group the more credible the conclusions. Since we speak so much, it gives us a large sample to examine. The truth is there. What we really think and feel is going to be revealed in what we say. The tongue, what we say, is what will give evidence to the emptiness and worthlessness of surface religion. The truth comes out. The predominant patterns in our speech point their way to what’s in our heart. If Christianity has never touched your tongue it has never touched your heart. It is a profound truth and yet it is as simple as that.

Included under the heading of the “tongue” would be other forms of communication such as letters or notes that we write, things we post on the Internet, YouTube, Twitter, blogs, Facebook,

and the like. These things are also communication, and corrupt communication can proceed from more than the mouth. It proceeds from the heart and out through different outlets.

A foul tongue is indicative of a polluted heart. Matthew 15:8-9 – *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.* You can't say that you love someone when you seek to hurt them with your words. How can someone who claims Christ be looking to use their tongue to build themselves up while also looking to use their tongue to tear others down? If there is venom on your lips, there is poison in your heart.

Think about how many sins of the tongue that there are. The Bible gives us a long list. Perverse speech, cursing, crude jokes, gossip, slander (assassinating someone's reputation), back talking (cf. Titus 2:9), railing accusations (passing sentence on someone), duplicity (saying one thing to one person and something else to someone else), flattery (complimenting just to gain advantage), reviling (verbally abusive), lying, bearing false witness, deceitful or manipulating talk, jealous/derogatory talk, vindictive talk, grumbling (complaining, especially against God), foolish vows, foolish speech, bitter speech, hasty speech, prideful boasting (which proves our lack of wisdom – cf. James 3:14), evil speech instead of edifying speech, vanity in prayer and using God's name, it is no wonder that James uses the tongue as the test of our conversion. It is also a test of our maturity. By their words, Christians aren't supposed to please themselves; they are to please God. Otherwise, they are only deceiving their own heart.

What is the Intention of this Test? To reveal spiritual self-deception (*but deceives his heart*). Someone who does not restrain their tongue is deceived. They deceive their own heart by their lifestyle (God knows my heart, yes, but you don't). Of course, people can put on a show with their words, but they are empty, worthless, a lie, to their own heart. Isaiah 29:13 (NET) – *These people say they are loyal to me; they say wonderful things about me, but they are not really loyal to me. Their worship consists of nothing but man-made ritual.* A hearer of the Word who is not a doer of the Word is deceived into thinking that they are justified by the religious things they do even when their lifestyle is characterized by sinful communication.

Now the sins of the tongue include what we choose to say, and also what we choose not to say. However, James isn't really describing what this deceived man does, but what he doesn't do. He doesn't bridle his tongue. Of course, Christians struggle with their tongues too. It is the most difficult part of us to master. If James had said that Christians are those who don't ever sin with their tongues, then we wouldn't have any. The difference is that the Christian wants to honor God with their words, not just in praise to Him but in life to please Him. Once again, using the language of vs.22-25, a doer will bridle their tongue, and a hearer will not.

Bridling the tongue is both a conscious choice and a continual choice. This doesn't mean less communication, it means pure communication. This doesn't mean just shutting your mouth at times; it also means steering your mouth at all times. This is not keeping your mouth closed, but keeping it under control. The Christian won't restrain their tongue perfectly, but they will do so purposefully. Also prayerfully, as we talked about in our sermon "*Protect Me from Me*": Psalm 141:3 – *Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!* Someone who bridles their tongue is someone that knows how to use discretion.

If we would harness the power of our tongues we could live with greater power. It is about being *intentional* with our words versus being careless with them. We need to learn to discern not only what to say but when and how to say it. Then our words can become a word in due season (Proverbs 15:23), and a word fitly spoken (Proverbs 25:11). Proverbs 17:27 – *Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.* This is not to say that speaking less is always the right thing to do, or that the person who uses the least words is always the wisest. Often we do need more than a few simple words to fully convey the truth. Still, if we were more *selective* with our words, we would be more *effective* with our words.

Otherwise, if we are never bridling our tongue, then we are deceiving our own heart, and it means that our religion is an empty shell. It is only surface level, it isn't from a renewed heart, it isn't real, and all our religious activity is worthless.

What is the Indication of this Test? An empty profession (*this person's religion is worthless*). Someone who is deceived in this way (they don't bridle their tongue) has an empty religion. An unbridled tongue as a lifestyle means we are deceived as to our own salvation; our religious profession is empty, no matter how much religious activity.

But while this is a test of our conversion, it is also a test of our maturity. For the true Christian, we do bridle our tongue. But this might describe what we are like at certain times. We all fall into that category at times, and when this is what is going on in our life, whatever we think that we are offering to God in terms of service or worship is also empty, worthless. An unbridled tongue that we might exercise or fall into at times means our service and worship is empty at those points, our religious activity is vain in those moments. That is why we have to keep in a state of repentance, and grow in grace and into maturity with our mouth.

So let me ask you, what is your communication pattern like these days? What are you talking about most these days? If you say that you are a Christian, stop acting like those who aren't. A doer won't restrain their tongue perfectly, but they will do so purposefully, and prayerfully. For the Christian, even when tragedy and suffering strike, you talk about the events, circumstance, and situations, but you bring it all together into the context of biblical revelation and God.

Matthew 12:36-37 – *I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.* Most people really don't pay much attention to their words. And yet, the Lord Jesus says that our hearts will be made manifest in the judgment by our words. We are responsible for what we say. We must live in the light of the fact that our talk will be judged. Our speech is evidence. There's nothing like the tongue to remind you that it is impossible for a man to walk perfectly before God (cf. James 3:2-12). Your tongue shows you that you need the grace of the Gospel in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you aren't a Christian, your tongue ought to be proof enough that you need grace. If you are a Christian, remember that you aren't just a sinner who has been saved by grace; you are a saint who is being changed by grace. The grace that saves you is the same grace that changes you. The question is; what do your words say about you?

Psalm 19:14 – *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*