

James Chapter 1F
“The Tests of True Religion”

Some of you know my background, for those who don't, I was raised in the Episcopal Church and membership in the Church of England was a proud part of my family heritage. Many of my childhood memories involve services and activities surrounding the church. (*I guess some things don't change*)

- I don't think I will ever forget the awe and grandeur of the Midnight service on Christmas eve.
- The smell of Frankincense, the golden image of cross as it moved toward the chancel in holy procession.
- The reverential atmosphere and progression of the liturgy somehow invoked in me a reverence for God.

As a young teenage boy, I memorized the Liturgy word for word and I couldn't wait until I was old enough to serve as an acolyte. (*I'm sure that's shocking to you*)

- I rang the church bell before the Sunday service and worked my way to the coveted position of carrying the cross. I took great pride in the fact that I could hold the sacred position for hours.
- On the outside, I would have been seen as a good religious boy.
- I had a chain of Sunday School attendance metals that could decorate my shirt like a Kernel in the Army.
- My family actually became friends with the Pastor's family and we shared a summer vacation together. Even today I remain friends on Facebook with that Pastor's daughter.

As I grew through my teenage years, the duplicity of my life became a hindrance to my soul. My religious exterior was no more than empty shell covering the corruption of an increasingly wicked heart.

- In my teens I became what the Lord Jesus called a “Whitewashed Tomb.” On the outside I looked clean and good but on the inside I was full of dead men's bones.
- Looking back, I can see, even at the age of 14 or 15 God was preparing my heart to receive the Gospel that I would hear for the very first time at the age of 16.

I bring this up this morning because the next section in the Epistle of James will focus on “True Religion.” Vs 27, “**Religion that is Pure and undefiled before God.**”

- The word that James uses, translated “Religion” (threskos) refers to the external rituals, the liturgies, routines and ceremonies that were common in the Jewish world. The famous Jewish historian Josephus used this word to describe the worship of the Temple at Jerusalem. Paul used the same word to describe his former life as a Pharisee in Acts 26:5.

So, when I use the word “Religion:”

- I may be referring to a ritual that is merely external; a ceremony that is void of true saving faith. Like my own religious practice when I was young.
 - That's not to say anything negative about the church. The problem was not with the church it was most certainly within ME!

James knows that religious claims can be empty – useless professions of unbelieving individuals that fail to meet the standards of true faith.

- BUT my friends, religion can ALSO be a positive term. Religion is positive when it describes the true worship of God's redeemed people.
- How then can we know the difference? Well, James is going to help us understand the distinguishing marks of true and false religion.
 - I encourage you to open your heart to the Word of the Lord and listen carefully to James' test of true religion.

In two short verses James provides us with an outline that he will follow for the remainder of his Epistle. Here at the end of chapter 1 he gives us with three principles that he will expand upon throughout the remainder of his letter.

1. Worthless Religion (Also in 3:1-12 & 4:11-12)
2. True Religion (Also in 2:1-13, 5:1-6)
3. Clean Religion (Also in 4:4-10)

1. Worthless Religion

James 1: 26 **If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.**

- Any person who deems himself to be religious but has no regard, no control over the words that come out of his mouth; that person is self-deceived and his religion is empty, worthless and vain.

If you were to embark on a careful study of the word "Tongue" throughout the Bible, you would come up with what seems to be an endless list of perverse acts that are caused by that small, seemingly insignificant member of your body.

- Psalm 5:9 speaks of "Lies and Flattery"
- Psalm 15:3 speaks of the "Slander and reproach."
- Psalm 34:13 speaks of "Deceitful words"
- Psalm 52:2 speaks of "Evil Plotting"
- Psalm 73:9 speaks of "Prideful Speech."
- Psalm 140 speaks of a "venomous tongue"
- Proverbs 17 Speaks of a "dishonest tongue."

And I didn't even mention all of the scriptures that deal with: "cursing, oppressive speech, boasting, backbiting and angry lips that are full of fury.

James words become even more graphic in his description of the sins of the tongue in Ch. 3. James 3: 6 **And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.** 7 **For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,** 8 **but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.**

- I ask you to allow these verses to do a thorough evaluation of your heart. Don't walk away from the mirror of God's Word and forget what He has shown you.
- When we speak of "Sins of the Tongue" we often think of someone else. That truck driver I used to work with. BUT I need the H.S. to search my own heart.
- Even if you are by nature a quiet and reserved individual, you have to admit there are times when you find yourself under pressure, when the wrong person pushes all of the right buttons your frustration bursts out of your mouth like a race horse out of the gate.

In light of what James calls the unruly nature of the tongue, I have to ask, "Is there really any hope for the practice of true religion among the fallen children of men?"

- Frankly, apart from the gracious intervention of God, there is absolutely no hope of taming the unruly tongue.
- In order to successfully bridle the tongue, it is essential that we undergo a heart transplant because the heart and the tongue are inseparably connected.
- The Lord Jesus himself teaches that the transformation of the tongue requires a complete overhaul a regeneration of the heart,.

Luke 6: 43 **"For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. 45 The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.**

- IN order to make the tongue good the heart must become good.
- And this is exactly what God accomplishes through the New Birth. I referred to this last week when I pointed to the book of Ezekiel. (remember?)

Ezekiel 36:26 **And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.**

- Those who are born of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit have been cleansed of all sin and given a brand new nature. Instead of being driven by the flesh we are led by the Spirit.
- Peter tells us that we who believe have become partakes of the divine nature having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

This new nature has a significant effect on the words of our MOUTH: David writes: Ps 39:1 (David) **I said, "I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue; I will guard my mouth with a muzzle, so long as the wicked are in my presence."**

The Patriarch Job trusted in our great redeemer and as a result he sought to bridle his tongue. Job 27:3 **as long as my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils, 4 my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit.**

- So too the fruit of God's Spirit in our lives brings a new self-control that effects the words of our mouth.

What do we know so far?

We know that worthless religion could be described as any unbiblical belief system, any false practice of worship that is not able to transform the human heart.

Worthless religion was described by the Apostle Paul in these terms:

2 Timothy 2Ti 3:5 **having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.**

- Worthless religion is powerless to transform the heart. (and tongue)

Now, in a wonderful way using contrasting images James moves on from describing worthless religion to what he portrays as pure and undefiled religion. We will call this "True Religion."

2 True Religion

James 1: 27a **Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,**

- Listen, the contrasting words that James uses here to describe what he calls pure religion depicts a lifestyle of worship that is morally clean and free from fleshly contamination.
- We understand that pure religion is the natural outflow of a redeemed heart.
- James helps us understand that pure religion is not displayed through the pomp of ceremonies, the frankincense and grand procession of the Christmas Eve Midnight service that impressed me as a child.
 - Not found in the dead rituals of the Pharisees.
- Instead pure religion is displayed in a much more intimate and benevolent act that is AIMED at the most vulnerable and needy people in the church.
- Visiting Orphans and Widows in their affliction.

As we dig into this we need to understand, James is not suggesting that the only people we ever need to be concerned about are orphans and widows. If we have them covered we don't have to concern ourselves with anything or anyone else.

- Certainly the love and mercy of God are extended far beyond those two unique groups of people.

I think we would understand James statement better if we consider the historic and cultural context.

IN James' day, widows and orphans were the most vulnerable members of society.

- Back then, there was no social security, no life insurance, no IRA or 401K whereby a husband could leave his family well endowed.
- Widows and orphans epitomized those who were powerless. They had no means of support, no rights and no status in the community.
- In Jerusalem the Temple provided a limited measure of assistance for the widow and orphan but when that widow became a Christian she was immediately cut off from the benevolence of the Temple and was left with nothing and no one but the Lord to rely on for her sustenance.
- And that's why the Apostles ordained deacons in Acts 6 to carry much needed provisions to the widows in the church. But that assistance was minimal.

Although the widows and orphans had very little human support, the Scripture reveals the special place that these individuals had in God's heart.

Psalm 68:55 **Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.**

- God identifies himself as the Father of the fatherless, the protector of the widows. This kind of benevolence is an essential part of His divine nature.

He commands His people Israel to reflect His nature in their practices.

Exodus 22: 22 **You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.**

23 **If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry,**

24 **and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.**

- It should be no surprise to us, when God put on human flesh, he would be seen expressing a special care for the most vulnerable members of human society.

One of my favorite narratives in the Gospel of Luke portrays the compassion of the Lord Jesus to a certain widow from the town of Nain.

- The giver and sustainer of life is traveling through the region of Galilee when His entourage crosses paths with a funeral procession. (Life meets Death)

Luke 7: 11 **Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. 12 As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her.**

13 And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." 15 And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!"

- I would ask that you Focus your attention on that last phrase, when Jesus miraculously handed the boy back to his mom and the mom back to the boy, the PEOPLE exclaimed. "God has VISITED his people."

The same God who visited his people calls those of us who have become partakers of the divine nature to do the same things that He did and visit the orphan and Widow in their affliction.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father is this: **TO VISIT, orphans and widows in their affliction**

- This word "VISIT" implies NOT merely that you should stop in on them. The word "Visit" can more literally be translated to look after or to care for them.
- This word is frequently used by the Lord Jesus to speak of Christian benevolence that is pleasing to God.

I have often been called upon to visit believers in their time of affliction, to care for the elderly in their infirmity. Many times I have arrived only to find that the one I came to visit is sound asleep. What should I do? Shake them, startle them? Should I Leave them, after all they are not able to hear my words and they will most likely never even know that I was there with them anyway.

- Even if they are asleep, I take the time to read the Psalms and spend some time praying for them.
- But I must admit there have been times when I wrestled with what seemed to be a series of vain attempts to comfort those who were afflicted.
- And then I listened to a sermon by Allister Begg. In His sermon Allister described the time when he served as an assistant Pastor, a time when he was charged with the visitation of the elderly and infirm.

He said to his Senior Pastor, I was wondering if I might drop some of the elderly who are on my visitation list.

- The Pastor said "Why?"
- To which Allister replied, "Well nothing actually happens when I go to visit them. In many situations they are not even conscious. They are not alert and I am not sure that they actually hear me.
- The Pastor said, Oh Allister do you know what you are doing when you go?
- Allister said, "Yes I am visiting the old people."

- The Pastor said “No you are ministering to the Lord Jesus.” Then he quoted the Words of the Lord Jesus: (parable of the talents)

Matthew 25: 39 **And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’** 40 **And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’** And so my friends:

As we seek to live out the Gospel in our everyday lives, as we obediently lay our lives down as a living sacrifice practicing a religion that is pure and undefiled, we are called to display the nature of our Father, showing benevolence and tender care to the most needy members of Christ’s Body.

- Now as we come to the Final point: James wants us to know that true religion involves more than actively pursuing social justice.
- Benevolence toward others is insufficient by itself as a display of pure religion. There is a second element that is just as crucial, maybe even more so than our random acts of kindness.
- We are called to KEEP ourselves unstained from the world.

3 Clean Religion

James 1:27 **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.**

- “Unstained” refers to our personal character and it could be described as “Untainted, Unblemished” by our interactions with the sinful, corrupt world system that is all around us.
- The verb to “Keep” is present active infinitive that expressed continual action and it speaks of the ongoing Spiritual Watchfulness that must be taking place in the lives of God’s people

A.T. Robertson - *"to keep on keeping oneself un-specked from the world" (a world, κοσμος, that is full of dirt and slime that bespatters the best of men).*

You might liken this to a little boy who has just had a bath. He is perfectly clean from head to toe. His Father has just dressed him in his best Sunday clothes. But as soon as he finishes combing his hair he runs out the door into the muddy yard in the midst of a heavy downpour on his way to the car.

- His surroundings actively threaten the cleanliness that his Father has labored so diligently to provide. ON the way out the door the Father says, “Keep yourself unstained from the World!”
- Like the boy, we have been cleansed, we have been washed by our loving Father.

Titus 3: 4 **But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,** 5 **he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,**

- Like the little boy in my story, the Father has washed us in the washing of regeneration.
- On the Cross the Lord Jesus removed the stain of our sin, and in the course of time the Holy Spirit applied the finished work of Christ to us personally through the new birth.
- Like the boy we wrestle with a desire to jump in the puddles we see. BUT
- God filled us with his Spirit and sent us out into the world that we should serve as salt and light.
- If the salt should lose its saltiness, what good is it?

The Power of God working through the Gospel of Jesus Christ has caused us to be SALT and LIGHT in this present world.

- The transformation of our Tongue.
- The compassion whereby we love and care for the orphan and Widow
- Combined with an ever increasing personal holiness.
- THIS my friends is TRUE Religion.

Here at Harvest we are NOT out to win the world by becoming LIKE the World.

1 John 2: 15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world — the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life — is not from the Father but is from the world. 17 And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

True religion.. Biblical Christianity is a matter of holy obedience to God's word that is reflected , among other ways, by our honesty in regard to ourselves, by our selflessness in regard to the needs of others, and by our uncompromising moral and spiritual stand in regard to this world.

BENEDICTION:

Romans 12: 1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.