

Is Religion Good or Bad?

[James 1:26-27](#)

James, Day 10

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.

- James 1:26-27, ESV

Shakespeare's Hamlet says, "There is nothing good or bad, only thinking makes it so." Ironically, in our day, many of the same people who would say there's no such thing as an objective standard of right and wrong, but it's all personal and subjective, then turn around and declare that religion is wrong and bad for people and the world. They resent it when religion judges their actions as immoral, but then they turn around and judge religion as immoral. Perhaps it's not only religious people who are capable of hypocrisy.

But, seriously, what about the accusation that religion is bad for people and bad for the world? Is religion good or bad? Well, the answer to this question is, "It depends." Perhaps the better question is not simply, "Is religion good or bad?" but rather "What makes for good and bad religion?"

James says that if a religious person has an unbridled tongue, he is self-deceived and has a worthless religion. It's sadly too easy to point out examples of this kind of religion: Bitter gossip, slander, half-truths, and self-promotion flow freely from the lips of these religious people. We don't even need to turn on the cable television to see this kind of hypocritical, weak religion. Sometimes all we need to do is listen to ourselves. But we'll talk more about the tongue in chapter 3.

On the positive side, James gives us two key marks of good religion that is right in God's eyes: helping those in need and refraining from the defilement of the world. So, true and God-honoring religion has a positive and a negative aspect, things we commit to doing and things we abstain from doing.

On the positive side, we are to help widows and orphans in need. Those who have no earthly protector and provider, the poor and vulnerable, should receive protection and provision from us, the church. We should meet their physical, financial, emotional, and spiritual needs to the best of our ability. To visit them in their affliction is more than just a little bit of charity from a distance; it is life-on-life, personal care.

On the negative side. "*to keep oneself unstained from the world*" means to clearly see the filth and rebellion of the world for what it is and to stay away from it. Sexual immorality, pornography, abuse, faithlessness, profanity, violence, etc. are all pollution of God's good world, and they should break our hearts.

What do these two aspects have in common? Both are rooted in a true knowledge of God. If we know that God is love and that God is holy, and that we are called by Him to "be imitators of God as dearly loved children" (Eph. 5:1), we will seek to walk in love and holiness by His gracious power. Just as all real children admire, observe, and imitate their parents, so all truly religious children of God admire, observe and imitate their Heavenly Father.

So, is religion good or bad? Well, it turns out religion is something like the little girl in the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow -

There was a little girl,
 Who had a little curl,
Right in the middle of her forehead.
 When she was good,
 She was very good indeed,
But when she was bad she was horrid.

Let's ask the Lord to give us the grace to make our religion and true and sincere imitation of our loving and holy Heavenly Father.