

If Any Man among You Seem to Be Religious
James 1:26-27

James 1:26-27 reads, “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

With **James 1:26-27** we come to the fifth paragraph of this epistle. Again we remember that the Holy Spirit inspired purpose for this epistle is to provide pastoral counsel for a spiritually mature walk in the believer’s life. Even so, this fifth paragraph gives counsel concerning an unbridled tongue in relation to a pure religious life. The contextual situation and setting for the paragraph is established through the opening line of the paragraph -- “If any man among you seem to be religious.” Consisting of only two sentences in two verses, this short paragraph presents a clear contrast between a religious life that is lacking in spiritual substance and a religious life that is rooted in spiritual substance.

Grammatically, this paragraph does not include any specific connectives to the previous paragraph. Yet thematically this paragraph does possess a connection to the previous context. In **verse 21** the instruction was given that we should receive the truths of God’s Holy Word with meek submission, and the reason was given that we should do so because the truth of God’s Holy Word is able to deliver our inner character from its natural selfishness. Yet in **verse 22** the further instruction was given that we should then be obedient doers of God’s Word and work, and the warning was given that being only a hearer of God’s Word is spiritually self-deceiving. Even so, in **verse 25** the promise was given that not being “a forgetful hearer,” but being an obedient doer of God’s Word and work, is the way to spiritual blessing. As such, these verses teach us that we must be transformed unto godliness in character through the truth of God’s Word and that our transformed character must display itself in obedient performance of God’s work. In addition, these verses rebuke any manner and amount of hearing God’s Word that does not actually produce godly character and conduct as being a form of spiritual self-deception.

Now in **verse 26** the warning is given concerning another form of self-deception. In **verses 22-25** the warning concerned the self-deception of an active hearing of God’s Word that does not produce an obedient doing of God’s work. In **verse 26** the warning concerns the self-deception of a religious doing of God’s work that is not rooted in a godly transformation by God’s Word. Indeed, we are warned against being a hearer only of God’s Word without being a doer also of God’s Word. Yet we are also warned against being a doer only of God’s Word without being transformed also by God’s Word. Indeed, the external test that is presented by which we may determine the genuine transformation of our inner character from selfishness unto godliness concerns the bridling of our tongue. Even so, **verse 26** declares, “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.” As such, we find another connection with the previous context. In **verses 19** the instruction was given that we must deny our natural selfishness in our relations with others, being “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath;” and in **verse 20** the reason was given that we must do so because selfish wrath and anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Now in **verse 26** the warning returns us to the matter of selfish communication through an unbridled tongue.

Focusing our attention upon the truths of **James 1:26-27** themselves, we observe a clear contrast between a faulty religious life and a faithful religious life. Indeed, **verse 26** closes with the statement, “This man’s religion is vain;” whereas **verse 27** opens with the statement, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this.” In this context, the words “religious” and “religion” refer specifically to a diligent observance and dedicated performance of religious activities, duties, and services. As such, these words refer to the external, outward conduct of an individual’s service for the Lord; whereas the words “godly” and “godliness” refer to the inward character of an individual’s service to the Lord. Since outward service for the Lord is a necessary element of our walk with the Lord, these words “religious” and “religion” can be employed in a positive spiritual context. However, since outward service can be accomplished apart from any inner spiritual commitment, these words can also be employed in a negative spiritual context. In **James 1:26-27** there is a contrast established between a religious life that is vain, being spiritually profitless, and a religious life that is valuable, being spiritually pure. On the one hand, there is a religious life that is spiritually profitless because it is performed without the spiritual substance of godly character. On the other hand, there is a religious life that is spiritually pure because it is rooted in the spiritual substance of godly character.

I. A religious life that is spiritually profitless.

James 1:26 presents the case of a religious life that is spiritually profitless, saying, “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.” Such an individual as described in this verse thinks that he himself possesses a right relationship with the Lord simply because he is much involved in religious activities and services. Yet God’s Word concludes that such an individual is deceiving his own heart, and that such an individual’s religious activities and services are spiritually vain (that is – spiritually empty and without spiritual profit). Is this heavy rebuke delivered because the religious activities and services themselves are wrong? There is no indication of this in the statement of the verse. Indeed, this individual’s religious activities and services may all be good activities, such as daily Bible reading, daily prayers, faithful church attendance, faithful giving, regular ministry involvement, regular witnessing, etc. The religious activities and services in themselves are not the problem. Rather, the problem is stated to be that this individual “bridleth not his tongue.” It is directly because of the selfish communication of an unbridled tongue that the Lord our God defines such an individual’s religious activities and services to be spiritually vain.

Yet why is an unbridled tongue presented as the gauge for the Lord’s acceptance of our external religious activities and services? The answer is revealed in **Luke 6:45**, wherein our Lord Jesus Christ declared, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.” The communication of our mouth has a direct spiritual connection to the character of our heart. Therefore, the communication of our mouth is an excellent spiritual gauge for the true character of our heart. On the one hand, an individual who is godly in heart character will speak forth in a godly, loving manner. On the other hand, an individual who is ungodly in heart character will speak forth in an unbridled, selfish manner.

Thus when an individual is characterized by the selfish communication of an unbridled tongue, such reveals that he possesses the selfish character of an ungodly heart. Even so, in **Matthew 12:34-37** our Lord Jesus Christ rebuked the Pharisees, saying, “O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things. But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.” In addition, any “good” religious activities and services that are founded upon the selfish character of an ungodly heart (as revealed by the selfish communication of an unbridled tongue) are defined by the Lord our God Himself as spiritually empty and profitless. Even so, in **Matthew 23:25-28** our Lord Jesus Christ rebuked the Pharisees, saying, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.”

II. A religious life that is spiritually pure.

In contrast, **James 1:27** presents the case of a religious life that is spiritually pure, saying, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” Again we must remember that the word “religion” refers, not to an individual’s inner character, but to an individual’s outward conduct. As such, this verse is not presenting the definition of godliness in character. Rather, this verse is presenting a description concerning the manner in which godliness in character will display itself in outward conduct. Indeed, this verse indicates that a religious life which is rooted in a godly character is defined by the Lord our God Himself as spiritually pure and undefiled. Furthermore, this verse indicates that such a pure and undefiled religious life will display itself in a two-fold manner.

First, a pure and undefiled religious life will display itself through a sacrificial compassion to help the needy in their need. This is presented by the phrase, “To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction,” wherein the “fatherless and widows” represent the whole classification of the poor and needy. A pure religious life that is genuinely rooted in a godly character will bear the fruit of godly love toward others, and this fruit of godly love toward others will be demonstrated by a sacrificial giving in personally helping to meet their needs. Even so, **1 John 3:16-18** declares, “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.”

Second, a pure and undefiled religious life will display itself through a separated conduct to remain spiritually unspotted from worldliness. This is presented by the phrase, “And to

keep himself unspotted from the world,” wherein the word “world” refers to the selfish, ungodly philosophies and practices of this world. A pure religious life that is genuinely rooted in a godly character will pursue after holiness in all manner of conduct, and this pursuit after holiness will be demonstrated by a separated guarding of one’s self from the influences of this present evil world. Even so, **1 John 2:15-17** declares, “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”