

James 1:21-27

Avoiding and Overcoming Vain Religion

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 – v. 26

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity (Eccles. 1:2). And in all that follows in the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon will elaborate on that theme and will describe the various activities that take place under the sun which amount to emptiness and lead to vexation of spirit.

Solomon was certainly qualified to make such a statement for he had access to virtually everything. He had untold riches and he had many wives. He sought wisdom, he sought pleasure, he even gave himself to madness and came away concluding that all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Each succeeding generation after Solomon has proven the same thing. And it's no wonder. We live in a fallen world. We come into this world with a void in our hearts that nothing in this world can fill.

As Christians we certainly find ourselves agreeing with Solomon. Many who have gained a saving interest in Christ can testify that it wasn't until they experienced the emptiness of this world that they eventually found satisfaction in Christ. One of the things we find frustrating at times, as Christians, is the sad truth that the world thinks in backwards fashion. The world thinks that following Christ must lead to a denial of satisfaction because Christians do not run to the same excess of riot with them and they count this to be a strange thing (1Pet. 4:4).

So we can certainly understand vanity and vexation of spirit when it comes to the things of the world but what the Christian may find tragically ironic is that it's actually possible for religion to become vain as well. In our text James makes reference to those that have the appearance of being religious and yet at the end of the day, as James describes it, there are those whose religion is vain. *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.*

And in the next verse James contrasts vain religion with that which he labels as pure religion. *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* (v. 27). Several years ago we studied this epistle by James and I took v. 27 to be the key verse to the entire epistle. This epistle is devoted to contrasting true life-transforming religion with that which is vain or empty as well as defiled and certainly dishonoring to God.

Vain religion was also a matter of constant concern for the Apostle Paul. He addresses the issue in 1Corinthians, especially in chp. 15 where he makes reference to *believing in vain, preaching in vain, faith that is also vain*. In 2Corinthians he makes reference in 6:1 to those who can actually receive the grace of God in vain. Can such a thing actually be possible? It appears in that verse that it can indeed be possible. And so real is that

possibility that Paul exhorts the Corinthians when he writes in 6:1 *We then, [as] workers together [with him], beseech [you] also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.* Something as wonderful and as full and free as grace has the potential to become something received in vain. Paul was also concerned for the Galatians that they were suffering in vain. He was very much afraid that his labor among them might have been in vain. We find him warning the Colossians in Col. 2:8 that they *Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.*

Now it's one thing to deal with the vanity of the world. And we certainly do well to remember and affirm that in this world all is vanity and vexation of spirit. If more churches in our nation today appreciated this truth they might find themselves less inclined to imitate the world. But when it comes to our religion you would think that we could take exception to the phrase *vanity of vanities all is vanity.* And unfortunately it cannot be denied that many that name the name of Christ find their experience to be more a vexation of spirit than a rich and satisfying experience.

And there are those that start out well and find their religion to be a wonderful source of stability and blessing who see their religion degenerate into something that is vain and defiled. And so I want to focus on this subject this morning of vain religion. And I want to focus on it for a specific purpose – that purpose being that we may be equipped to watch against it, avoid it and overcome it when we find ourselves degenerating to it. Simply put:

We Must Avoid and Overcome Vain Religion

And in the moments that remain I want to think about how we avoid and overcome vain religion. Consider with me first of all that if we would avoid and overcome vain religion:

I. We Must Identify the Elements of Vain Religion

This should not prove too difficult to do for you see the elements of vain religion are exactly the same as the elements of true religion. In terms of the activities that characterize both they are the same. For example:

Prayer is an integral part of true religion. A man could scarcely be considered to be a Christian who never prayed. The way the Apostle Paul would be identified as a genuinely converted Christian to Ananias would be in the words: *Behold he prayeth* (Acts 9:11). And yet it's possible for prayer to be a vain exercise. Christ warned in Mt 6:7 that *when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen [do]: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.*

There were those among the Jews who were quite skilled and evidently quite impressive when it came to the practice of prayer. They loved to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the street. They loved to be seen of men. Christ says of them that the extent of their reward was whatever they gained by the way they fooled people into thinking they were devout and pious. What a vain reward is the reward of the hypocrite.

But the thing to note in particular here is that vain religion can manifest the same appearance as true religion.

Another manifestation of vain religion that looks like true religion is the activity of worship. I suppose it can be said that everybody worships something. The unsaved sinner may worship himself or he may worship the money he makes or he may worship the pleasures of this world.

But what I'm referring to, now, is not this kind of worship in the broad and general sense of sinners serving and worshipping the creature above the Creator but I'm referring to worship that is directed toward God and toward Christ. Christ refers to this worship in Mk. 7:7 where he says *Howbeit in vain do they worship me*, and let me just stop with this much of the verse to point out that on the surface of it the activity is proper. They're engaged in worship. And the object of their worship is proper. They are worshipping Jehovah God which is tantamount to saying that they're worshipping Christ.

And yet in spite of a legitimate activity aimed in the right direction their worship is nevertheless in vain and the reason it's in vain is given by Christ in the words that follow: *in vain do they worship me, teaching [for] doctrines the commandments of men*. Basically what Christ is saying here is that they invent their own ways of worship. How prevalent the notion is found this very day that Christ can be worshipped anyway we please. As long as we're engaged in the activity of worship and as long as Christ is the object of our worship God ought to be happy with us, the notion goes.

And to suggest that God is not happy with those who worship in accordance with man-made traditions and with worship modes and styles that are invented by men – to suggest that God is not honored with such worship is found to be offensive by many that name the name of Christ. And so we need to be sure now that what I'm suggesting to you comes from Christ. It is Christ himself that makes the statement *Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men*.

I should point out with regard to this statement of Christ that another contributing factor to vain worship is not merely that it's based on man-made methods of worship but it's also described as half-hearted worship as well. Christ is citing a passage in Mark 7 which comes from the book of Isaiah. He says in Mk. 7:6 *Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me*. And what this statement from Isaiah teaches us is that it's possible for our worship to be true to form and yet still be vain. How can empty heartless and mere external worship be described as anything but vain?

Here, I'm afraid, is where the whole matter of vain religion really comes close to home. And when compared to this standard of heart engagement who among us can fail to admit that we know what it is to worship in vain because we know what it is to go through the motions of worship without our hearts being engaged in the practice. We know what it is to drag ourselves through worship. We know what it is indeed to sleep our way through worship. We know what it is to be so distracted before and during and after our worship

that we couldn't possibly refer to our worship as being anything else but vain worship. Let's not flatter ourselves this morning into thinking that we honor God with our vain worship. Vain worship is something we need to plead the blood of Christ over and we need to repent of it. This is a subject, I'm sure, that we could devote much more time to but we must move on because vain worship is but one of several elements that constitute vain religion.

We've seen that there is such a thing as vain praying, there's such a thing as vain worshipping – there's also such a thing as a vain reception of the grace of God. I referenced this earlier in my introduction. Paul refers to this in 2Cor. 6:1 *We then, [as] workers together [with him], beseech [you] also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.*

We're talking now about something that is foundational to our beliefs. We believe in the grace of God. We believe that salvation is by grace through faith and that not of ourselves. Our hope for heaven is contingent upon grace abounding even more than sin abounds. And yet here we learn that something that is foundational to our beliefs can actually be twisted and distorted in such a way that it becomes vain.

How does the reception of God's grace become vain? It becomes vain when it's made into a license for sin. It becomes vain when the promise of grace is not internalized by the recipient of grace. Grace, you see, is not simply a principle that governs God's dealings with us. It is that – but it's more than that. It's a life-transforming force or power.

Listen to the words of Paul in 1Cor. 15:10 *But by the grace of God I am what I am*, he begins by saying. And you see at once how foundational grace is to the Christian's life. God's grace defined what Paul was – that's how foundational it is not only to Paul but to any and every Christian. And then Paul goes on to say *and his grace which [was bestowed] upon me was not in vain*; Well, that's a good thing, Paul. For you exhort the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain but the question that we must now put to Paul is this – How do you know this Paul? How can you tell that God's grace was not bestowed on you in vain?

Listen to how Paul states how he knows this: *But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which [was bestowed] upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.* Here's how you can tell you have not received the grace of God in vain – you have found God's grace to be a compelling force within you. It has transformed your life in other words. And it has become the driving force to your life.

Are you beginning to see, now, the similarities between vain religion and true religion? They contain the same elements. You find prayer in true religion and you find prayer in vain religion. You find worship in true religion and you find worship in vain religion. You find the reception of grace in true religion and you find the reception of grace in vain religion. We have not yet exhausted the category of the elements of vain religion.

Paul makes reference to vain faith in 1Cor. 15 which is faith that is infected with heresy in the case in 1Cor. 15 it was the heresy of denying the resurrection of Christ. He also makes reference to vain janglings and vain babblings when he writes to Timothy. It doesn't take any deep insights to make the applications today of those phrases.

I think it's worth mentioning briefly one more manifestation of vanity or vain religion that is found in James epistle. In James 4:5 James raises this question: *Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?* I mention this element of vain religion because it's a very subtle one and a very easy one to fall prey to. We treat the Scriptures as if they speak to us in vain when we treat them in such a way as to suggest that we can disregard them.

I know I'm suppose to give and I know I'm suppose to meet with Christ daily and I know I'm suppose to sanctify the Lord's day but to the degree that I neglect these things I treat the Bible as a vain book and choose to govern my own life rather than let God rule my life and this thinking and acting certainly puts you on the path to vain religion if you haven't arrived there yet.

And you know what vain religion really amounts to when we contemplate these statements in Scripture that describe it? It amounts to something that is half-hearted at best which really doesn't take God or Christ very seriously at the end of the day. And it's something, therefore, that we need to be watchful against and we need to avoid it and we need to overcome it. The failure to overcome it, you see, leads to ramifications about our spiritual condition that are not pleasant to contemplate.

The person that can be complacent about his religion is a person that is probably engulfed in vain religion and perhaps has never known anything but vain religion. The evidence of grace in a professing Christian's life will be that he loathes vain religion. And when he detects its presence in his life it will bother him. He knows it isn't right. He knows that this is not what God intends. He knows enough to realize that vain religion is not what God has brought him into nor is it a practice that he desires to stay engaged in. Where the Christian detects it, his cry will be to God for forgiveness and for enabling grace to overcome.

And this leads to my next point about avoiding and overcoming vain religion. We've identified the elements of it. Think with me next that in order to avoid and overcome it:

II. We Must Apply the Corrective Measures to Overcome Vain Religion

Overcoming vain religion requires a couple of things one of which is very much in our control the other of which we need the Holy Spirit's help. We actually need the Holy Spirit's help in both of these things but we do have a more prominent part to play in the first of the two things I have in mind.

The first thing, you see, that's required for avoiding and overcoming vain religion is right thinking. And by right thinking I'm referring in particular to gospel thinking. Look again with me at Mt 6:7 *But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen [do]: for they*

think – do you see that? There’s a thinking process here that is not right. There’s a thinking process then that must be adjusted when we fall prey to it. And the issue can be more subtle than you realize. You see, their thinking is that *They shall be heard for their much speaking*. Are we not taught by Christ to ask and seek and knock and to keep asking and keep seeking and keep knocking? That certainly will lead to repetition in our praying won’t it? And the error that is being addressed in this verse by Christ is not so much the issue of repetition as it is the issue of merit.

They think that there’s something meritorious about how many words they use, or how many times they repeat themselves, or how long a time they spend in prayer. They think they can earn the right to a favorable answer to their prayers through multiplied words or through extended time in prayer. That’s the error and that’s the manifestation of vain religion.

The gospel correction to this legitimate activity that becomes vain is to know the basis upon which you are praying and make that basis your continue plea to God. In other words you plead the merit of Christ not the merit of your praying, not the merit of the length of your time in prayer or the merit of your fervency in prayer or the merit of the words of your prayer – your praying must be grounded in the merit of Christ’s life and death.

And when you think about it – what hope do you have for a favorable answer to your prayers apart from the person and work of Christ? When we pray for revival or when we pray for the salvation of our children or when we pray for the extension of Christ’s kingdom what do you want to draw God’s attention to? – the number of times you’ve prayed for these things? – as if to say to God – *Lord, have you not taken notice of how many times I’ve prayed for my children to be saved? Lord, have you not taken notice of how deeply this desire runs in my heart?*

You’d do better to pray – *Lord, I don’t deserve the things I seek thee for. I don’t deserve revival. My own inconsistencies are to blame for my children’s lost condition but Lord, while I don’t deserve answers to these prayers – Christ deserves answers to these prayers. I’m pleading the merit of his life and his atoning death. I’m pleading the promise and the invitation to ask that the Father may be honored in the Son and to ask that my own joy may be full and Lord, I know of nothing that will so bring honor to your Son and nothing that will so bring joy to my soul than to see revival blessing and to see my children come to Christ.*

This is what must be pleaded and repeated and sought after through a continual knocking on heaven’s door. Fervency and repetition in our praying do not making our praying vain unless those things come to be viewed as the meritorious grounds for God answering our prayers. And so we need to think right with regard to prayer. We need to make our thinking gospel thinking.

And when it comes to our worship there are two things required – an adjustment to our thinking and the work of the Holy Spirit on our hearts. The adjustment to our thinking comes through eliminating the notion that we can worship God according to the traditions

and doctrines of men. We must worship God in the way that he directs. We must worship in accordance with the commandments of God, in other words. This is what we refer to in Presbyterianism as the regulative principle of worship. There must be Divine warrant for every element in our worship and we must never take it upon ourselves to be inventors of worship styles.

That much we can control – but we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that we've arrived simply by being true to form. This is why I say that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is also essential because it takes the Spirit's help to enable us to be engaged with all our hearts in our worship. There are, however, things we can do in connection with the Spirit's help. You can prepare yourself for the time of worship. You can devote yourself to prayer and to time in God's word in which you are actively seeking the Spirit for the sensitivity you need for worship.

So much of vain worship, you know, is traceable to a lack of thought and lack of heart preparation about what you're about to engage in. And when you come to the Lord's house so distracted and so absorbed by what you're doing on other days of the week then it's small wonder that your time in worship does nothing for you except appease your conscience a little bit in the knowledge that you've thrown God a bone, as it were.

Better by far to spend time in prayer, praying for yourself, praying for the preacher, praying that you will in Spirit and in Truth actually meet with your Savior and know his presence in such a way that your heart will be filled to overflowing with his grace and his love and his mercy and his assurance that he's with you and for you and will never forsake you and will uphold and sustain you in all that you endeavor to do for him.

When you come away from the place of worship in that fashion then you will have avoided receiving the grace of God in vain. You will know more of what Paul says when he testifies *I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I but the grace of God which was with me* (1Cor. 15:10). Or you'll know more of what Isaiah refers to when he says at the end of chp. 10 in his book *they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings of eagles; they shall run and not be weary and they shall walk and not faint.*

What a contrast between mounting up with wings of eagles, and running and persevering or fainting. I wonder this morning which description fits you? Are you mounting up with wings of eagles or are you plodding along and on the brink of fainting? The difference between these vast differences may depend on whether or not your religion is true and genuine and vital or whether it has become empty and vain. Everyone hates vain religion. God hates it because it dishonors him. The world sees through it and can tell that it's empty. The Christian, therefore, needs to be watchful against it as something that must be avoided and must be overcome when it effects him.

May the Lord help us to identify it when it does appear in its various manifestations. And may we indeed be more than conquerors over it through right thinking and right actions.