

Religion That Is Worthless

James 1:26-27

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 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. (James 1:19-27 (ESV))

Some questions as we begin . . . what reaction comes across your heart and mind when you read words such as these in today's passage? Is your religion as pure and undefiled as it "seems" to you to be? Or, is it vain and worthless? And who gets to decide how good and right your religion really is, you or God?

A beginning thought here is that we Christians sometimes flinch when we hear our Christian faith being called "our religion", or when we're asked if we are "religious". In today's culture, the words "religion" and "religious" have been reduced to mean not much more than when a person takes part in some "systems of beliefs" in a "higher power". And we Christians like to quickly tell people that we are not "religious", we are "Christian"!

But be that as it may, here, the Apostle James is using the words "religion" and "religious" in much the same manner that we would refer to Christianity, or our Christian faith. And that's the way that we'll regard this word "religion" in our study today.

So, the question again, what reaction comes across your heart and mind when you read or hear these words in today's passage? Listen again, this time from the KJV!

26 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. 27 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. (James 1:26-27)

My first observation is that the strong and forceful nature of this man James can be clearly seen in these words. He does not "sugarcoat" his words. But we must also always remember that these are not just his words alone, they are the words of the Holy Spirit, the very "breath of God". And God is not "sugarcoating" them either. And for that reason, we ought to be very concerned, perhaps even weeping and grieving, as we are faced with the question that's being presented to us here. The question, "Is my, is your religion as real as it seems to us to be . . . or are we possibly deceiving ourselves? Think about it!

Listen again carefully, and note the beginning words,

26 If any man (any woman) among you seem (note this word “seem”) to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain. 27 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. (James 1:26-27)

“If any person among you seem to be religious.” With that one simple word, “seem”, God is immediately able to probe deeply within our souls and question us about just how “real” our religion really is. Here He begins by simply implying that our religion (our Christianity) may not truly “measure up” to be the religion that it “seems” to us to be, that we might be using the wrong measuring rod in our measurements. We might be deceiving ourselves into thinking that our relationship with Christ is more “real” and more effectual than it actually is.

And so then, a direct question to you and to me should be, “Is this true in your personal life?” “Is this true in my personal life?” “Is our religion, is our Christianity as ‘real’ as it ‘seems’ to us to be, or are we deceiving ourselves?”

In Proverbs 16, we’re told that

25 There is a way which seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death. (Proverbs 16:25 (NASB))

In these words of our text here in James 1, God is not necessarily questioning our “eternal salvation”, though for some He may be. But if we truly do have Christ as our Savior, the question more appropriately is, “Is our daily walk with Christ, as “real” as it should to be?” “Is the actual working out of our salvation, in the conduct and the behaviors of our daily life, really ‘real’”, pure and undefiled, or does it just “seem” to us to be?”

This term “real” has become a very popular expression in today’s culture. We often can hear it used in conversations, one person telling another to “be real”.

I must confess that I don’t often know what is intended by such advice. But I do sense a similarity of meaning in those words to these words of our scripture text for today, the thought being, that our being able to simply say the right words is not enough. To be “really real” our depth of spiritual understanding and our responses and our feelings must go beyond simple words.

And God is saying a similar thing to you and me today, warning us that our religion may not be as “real” as it might “seem” to us to be, that though we might know a lot of the right words to say, much of who we are and what we do might be “vain efforts”, because meaningless platitudes and surface responses will never rise to the level of the “religion”, the “Christian walk” that God desires for us to have. And if left as it is, our religion might never become “really real”.

For the most part, most of us Christians probably do believe that we are giving a good effort towards practicing our religion. We try to do the good deeds that come our way each day. We say good and right words, we live a reasonably wholesome lifestyle, and by doing a few good things, we convince ourselves and others of our right standing with the Lord.

But again, the measuring rod by which righteousness is measured, is not in our hand, it is in God’s hand. And I do fear that with Him doing the measuring, you and I might probably find ourselves to have far less “true and pure religion” than we think we have, that we might be “deceiving” our selves without realizing it. And too often that can happen without our knowing it’s taking place. We are told so in Jeremiah 17:9.

9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

I used to work with a man who would come to me to get my sanction on an idea or project that he wanted to accomplish. When I would disagree with his ideas, he would argue his point until I would wear down and give in. He knew that I truly did not agree with him, but that did not matter to him. Because if his idea seemed right to him, he always believed it to be right.

He appeared to be guided by the assumption, “I think it, therefore it is true”. But folks, according to this warning here in Jeremiah 17, such thinking can be very deceptive to us. Our own heart will deceive us.

9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

Too often, our personal affinities toward things in this life can get ahead of the actual truths that are given to us within these pages of scripture, and we truly do become deceived. But we must not allow that to take place. And we especially must not allow our hearts to deceive us into thinking that our relationship with Christ is better than it really is.

Here in these words of our text, God is giving us some of the clear and simple measurements that He uses as He observes our relationship with Him. He tells us that, 26 If (anyone) any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. 27 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. (James 1:26-27)

Simply put, our religion can be measured by the way in which we "walk our Christian walk" each day.

Listen to these words of 1 John chapter 2. There God tells us that, 4 He who says, "I know Him (that is God)," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 5 But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. 6 He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked. (1 John 2:4-6)

This is the "acid test" of our religion, our daily "Christian walk". And this acid test will always come to us, because God will make sure that it does. God is the engineer of all our circumstances, the "orchestra leader" of every providential setting. He will bring you and me into circumstances and setting that will surely reveal the "realness" of our religion. Are we "doers" of the word and not just "hearers" only?

And here in these words, God cites three measurements. The first is the use, or the misuse, of our tongue. The second, is the manner in which we treat and care for the less fortunate, the widows and the orphans. And then thirdly, the keeping of ourselves unspotted from the world. Listen again.

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As for our tongues, Proverbs 17:28 tells us that "even a fool seems to be wise when he keeps his mouth shut". Most of us are natural talkers, some more than others. But most all of us, given the opportunity, want to be heard on matters.

Recalling some of the earlier words in this chapter about the progression of sin within a person's soul, to merely have an unkind thought about a person, may not yet be a sin.

But when we allow that thought to linger too long, or we go ahead and voice that unkind thought, most often that is sinful.

To get angry and to want to cuss may not yet be a sin, but to express your anger, especially in profane words usually is sinful.

To disagree with another person, even out loud, may not be sinful, but arguments often are.

Gossip, slander, profanity, vulgar jokes, “know-it-all chatter” is usually filled with sinfulness and vanity and pride, and it needs to be “bridled” and brought under control.

. . . A second way that we defile our religion is in the manner that we treat or mistreat the less fortunate, the widows and the orphans.

Each of us might be able to legitimately claim that we have never intentionally mistreated widows and orphans . . . and it is probably true that we don’t openly do things like publicly humiliate them, or refuse to give them food and clothing when we know that they are hungry and cold. But do we mistreat them in other ways, such as, despising the drunks and the drug addicts and their families for not “getting out there and getting a job like everyone else.”

Or perhaps, do we mistreat them by the things that we “should do”, but “don’t do”, perhaps by not visiting with them and showing them kindness, fellowship and love. Sometimes, widows and orphans are lonely and insecure without family to depend upon. Just knowing that they have a friend that they can call on can be so helpful and comforting and reassuring to them.

Another way that we can mistreat widows and orphans is to withhold public assistance from them. Unfortunately, for most of my life, I have disagreed with the welfare system that we have in place in our country. And without question, the system is badly broken. But in recent years, my thoughts have become more accepting of the welfare system. Because as broken as it is, it still does provide some very needed help to many of the poor, and to the widows and orphans, those same widows and orphans that are spoken about here in these scriptures.

Part of the “real truth” about the welfare system is, the only reason it is in existence is because the “church” and the Christians that go there every Sunday, you and me, have not been doing our part. The people in our Christian communities do not reach out to help as we should. And the churches turn their heads from the needy and spend most

of their time and money in taking care of their own. And that is such a sad commentary on us as believing Christians.

May I confess to you that I am very convicted that I personally do not have the “pure religion” that God is speaking about here. And as your Pastor, I am not leading this church in the ways of “pure religion”. And for that I ask your forgiveness. And I want to start looking for more ways that we can help the needy and the widows and the orphans in our community. And I want you to help me to do it.

. . . Finally, the third way mentioned here by which we defile our religion is by letting the corrupt ways of the world trickle into our lives. We become spotted and blemished by the sinfulness that we let take up residence within our lives.

Remember the rule folks. Sin is not just a matter of us accidentally tripping over and breaking some of God’s rules. Sin is so much more than that. Sin is a predator, ever and always on the prowl, roaming to and fro within our souls, seeking to devour us. But as these words tell us, we are to turn from it, deny its power and control and keep our selves “unspotted” from it.

So, the question, as we close, “Is your religion, is my religion, as “real” as it “seems” to be, or are we simply allowing our hearts to deceive us?”

Join with me and let’s ask God to search our hearts and to lead us in the ways of the “pure religion” that He is speaking about here. Pray these words of Psalm 139!

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! 24
And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!
(Psalm 139:23-24)