

Religion That Is Worthwhile

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A question as we begin our study of these words of truth . . . "Is your religion worthwhile, or is your religion worthless"?

Here in these words, we are able to see some of the effects of the behaviors and responses that we've been studying about over the past few weeks, words that speak about how we, too often, are able to read and hear the pure and precious truths of God as they are given in these scriptures, looking into them as in a mirror, seeing our reflection within them, capturing a glimpse of ourselves, perhaps sometimes even seeing exactly what we look like, seeing things about ourselves that really need to be changed, but then turning and immediately forgetting what we just saw.

Unfortunately, too often, that is exactly what takes place on many Sunday mornings. Well-intending church members, having just listened to the preacher preach and having heard the scriptures expounded upon, with some even having been sincerely convicted of sins in their lives. But then, they get up, shake the preacher's hand as they leave, perhaps saying some nicety as they walk out the door, but then immediately get back to what many of us call "real life". And as we do, all the truths we learned about God and about ourselves from the words we just heard quickly fade into the obscurity of our daily busyness.

And folks, the most unfortunate part of all of that behavior is that we barely know that it is taking place. Because here in the South, our "Christianity", our "religion" as the Apostle James here calls it, really is important to us. For the most of us, we really want our "religion" to be more than it often is. We really want it to define who we are and our behaviors. But too often, it doesn't.

And God knows that it doesn't. And that is why He looks us straight in the eye in His Word and says to us,

23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. (James 1:23-24)

I must confess to you that, too often, I don't even have to wait until the busy workweek starts on Monday to forget what I looked like in the mirror of God's word. I can just as easily start on Sunday afternoon.

I can recall in some of my earlier days as a young Christian, when as our Sunday church service was beginning to draw to a close, it seemed that the preacher would never get finished. In those days, a friend and I had tickets to the Miami Dolphin's games, and they had a scheduled start time of 1:10 on Sunday afternoon, and if we went one minute past twelve noon, we would miss the kick-off.

But also, even when we didn't have a game to go to, the restaurant lines in our town would quickly fill up, and sometimes the wait would be for an hour.

And I can even remember in some of my later years, as a preacher, I would occasionally give the Sunday message at one of the churches near here, where the service started, as ours does, at 10:30 and ended at 11:30. One person told me that they did that so as to beat the crowd at Lake Tiak-O'khata.

Now, that may not be a really sinful thing to do, off course perhaps, but not blatantly sinful. But on other occasions, our sinfulness is obvious. But whatever course our "religion" takes, God warns us over and over in these scriptures that when it comes to our relationship with Him, we need to be very, very careful.

Well-meaning and well-intending churchgoers can so very easily forget what these scriptures actually say and can develop habits and behaviors that really do not meet God's definition of what He would call a worthwhile "religion".

In Matthew chapter 15, Jesus spoke about where whole church denominations could get off course in their beliefs and teachings. In that instance, scribes and pharisees, well-meaning and well-intending church leaders had developed rules and traditions for their then church (their synagogue), and they had elevated those rules and traditions to

the same level as the scriptures. Yes, those men knew what the scriptures actually taught, but they must have “looked away” from those scriptures, because they forgot them, and they made up their own.

And Jesus engaged them about it, saying in Matthew 15:6,

6 . . . for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. 7 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 8 “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15:6-9)

Those scribes and pharisees had taken a wrong turn. Yes, they probably had once studied and knew the true word, but for some reason, they turned and forgot what they had seen. And so, they developed a “religion” of their own, one that seemed more “religious” to them.

Here in James chapter 1, God is expressing a very similar problem concerning those well-intending people in James’ day. But he is also speaking to us who would read these words in our day, well-intending people like you and me. Why? It’s because we too, can so easily fall into the same failures. We too can look at these truths in God’s word one moment and then forget them the next. And like those people then, we too can reduce our Christianity to nothing more than a “religion”.

And for reasons that we don’t know, God chose for James to address two specific matters of importance. The first, having to do with the misuse of their tongue. And James will say a lot more about the misuse of our tongue later, but here he tells us

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

May I pause for a moment and remind us again of some of the basic rules that are foundational to these scriptures! The first is that all these words, every one of them, are the inerrant and infallible words of God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit, and breathed into to the minds of each of the writers of these scriptures, and then on to the pages of this bible.

And while yes, God's words do pass through the minds and the pens of the writers, picking up remnants of each writer's personality along the way, the words themselves ever and always remain the true and inerrant "breath of God". (2 Timothy 3:16)

The reason I mention that here is that James' personality becomes very evident as we read these words. He is a no-nonsense kind of man, seeming to cut very little slack to many of the people that he speaks about, even you and me.

Here, James first speaks directly to us about this matter that we treasure so much, what we call our "Christianity", but what he calls our "religion". He says in verse 26 . . .

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The word "thinks" is a very defining word in this verse. Here, we are being told that yes, we may "think" ourselves to be truly "religious", of good character, thinking and believing rightly on matters of our conversation and our lifestyle. But are we really? And measured by whose standards? Ours? What about God's standards? Do our standards "match up" with God's standards?

And here in verse 26, God gives us a quick "measuring rod" . . .

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God has many "measuring rods" for our behavior in these scriptures, and we mustn't think "guarding and bridling our tongue" is the only one. But our tongue truly is a powerful instrument, able to do great amounts of evil and harm.

In Matthew chapter 15, Jesus addressed just such a problem with the tongue. There He was responding to a complaint from the scribes and pharisees about the disciples eating without first having washed their hands. And Jesus said to the people,

10 "Hear and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person."
(Matthew 15:10-11)

And then, He went on in verse 18, to warn about what comes out of a person's mouth. He said

18 . . . what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. 19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone." (Matthew 15:18-20)

Folks, Jesus created us, He formed us with His own hands. And He knows every part of our being. He especially knows the way of our hearts. And in Jeremiah 17, He told us that

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

Dear friends, your heart, my heart is so desperately wicked and deceitful, that it deceives even our own minds, and so completely that we can't even know ourselves.

And perhaps that is part of the truth that God is revealing to us in these word of James 1, Verse 26. He tells us . . .

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This verse speaks about people who have deceived their own hearts and minds and "think" that they are religious, or in our vernacular, who "think" they are being "Christianly" in their behaviors. And they may even do enough "Christianly" things that they not only fool themselves, but also, many of their friends.

But folks, as Jesus reminded us there in Matthew 15, some awful things can lie hidden within our hearts, words and behaviors that can erupt and spill out from us with only a moment's notice.

Yes, it is so easy to see it taking place in our national media, with our news commentators and our politicians. Wow! These words of Jesus are proven out at most any moment we turn on the television.

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More “false witness” and “slander” can take place in only one minute on our national news than should ever take place in a lifetime.

But folks, as easy as it is to cast stones at those folks, here, God is not just speaking about those people. He is speaking about you and me, people who really do “think” ourselves to be “religious”, to be “Christianly people”.

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For myself, it too often takes only a moment for my tongue to begin to reveal some of the worst sinful things that lie beneath it within my heart. And again, I really can deceive myself often, justifying the way I feel and the things I say just because those things are actually “true”.

And isn’t that so with most of us, that if the things we are thinking and saying are really true, we then believe that we have license to think and to say those things. But folks, God has also given us other guidelines and standards by which we should measure our thoughts and the words we say.

In 1 Corinthians 10, we’re told that although our thoughts and our words may be “lawful”, and not obviously sinful, they may still not be “profitable” or “of value” to others. And because of that, we should not be so quick to say the things that come into our minds.

Underlying much of what James is saying is a deeper “heart problem”, that of “hypocrisy”. Too often, we do “think” highly of ourselves and of our opinions, and less highly of other people and their opinions. And with a loose tongue, we can voice our highly opinionated feelings.

And yes, we may often gain a following by voicing our opinion, other people agreeing with us, commiserating and even encouraging us on to more and more looseness of tongue.

But folks, these words need to be considered.

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Again, we may be actually saying very truthful words. But rather than bringing something of value to the people listening, and even to our own souls, our words are useless. And as these behaviors become a part of our "Christian witness", our "religion" becomes "worthless", not gaining anything for Christ or for His church.

And here, the implied alternative to our having an overactive tongue, is to first do as some people would say it, "just shut up". Folks, that is a very effective first step. Yes, you may still be thinking all those wrong things, but still, "just shutting up" can be an improvement. And will allow you time to repent of the inward sins.

Secondly, as James is implying here, instead of busying yourself with doing wrong things, busy yourself with doing Godly things, such as, visiting widows and orphans, and keeping yourself unstained by the world. Verse 27,

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 1:27)

And another verse that is always good is Philippians 4:8

8 . . . brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8)

Brethren, if we busy ourselves thinking on these things, we truly will be "religious", "Christianly" in our words and in our behaviors. And out of a heart that is set on these things, will come a "religion that is worthwhile", rather than a "religion that is worthless".

Before we close this message for today, may I bring our thoughts back to a subject that is dear to my own heart, that of the loving relationship that we husbands are to share with our beloved wives. Because it is in that very special relationship that this matter of an uncontrolled tongue needs a special warning.

And I will speak from the husband's perspective, but will ask that you wives also consider these matters from a wife's perspective.

Using the words of Ephesians 5 that commands a husband to love his wife as Christ loves her, and also using the words of 1 Peter 3 that commands a husband to be considerate of his wife and to hold her in high respect, I'd like to give this word of warning.

There is a common expression of our day that says, "familiarity breeds disrespect". "Familiarity breeds disrespect"! And I believe that, too often, that is a truism, and especially as it applies within a marriage relationship.

Men, as we live, "up close and personal" with our wives, we can foolishly fall into the trap that is referred to in verses 23 & 24. We know the truths given there in God's word, in Ephesians and in 1 Peter, but we walk away and quickly forget those truths.

And without even realizing that we are doing it, our tongues begin to do things they should not do, saying words and demonstrating attitudes that are wrong. Sometimes just being plain "mean", but other times just not being "considerate", and "respectful", and "loving".

And it is in those moments that our "religion", our "Christian witness" to them can become completely "worthless".

Men, these things can take place in the best of marriages, even my own. But we must not allow that to happen. And when it does, we must immediately come to the Lord and to our wives in humble repentance.

Men, when it comes to our relationship with our wives, you and I must keep our tongue under close watch. Our relationship can be said to be second only to the relationship we have with Christ. We must guard and protect it with every breath.

Bow with me please, and pray with me 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)

Amen!