

Name: _____

New Hope Baptist Church Bible Study

LESSONS FROM JAMES

Week 9: Do you have good religion?

JAMES 1:26-27

JAMES 1:26

God's perfect law should be put into practice in our speech. Here James introduces two major themes that he will discuss at length later:

- the use of the tongue (3:1-12) and
- the treatment of the unfortunate (throughout the letter).

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue. (NIV)

The way that others will know whether or not our faith is real is by what we choose to talk about and the way we speak.

Religious refers to external religious rituals, liturgies, routines, and ceremonies. Such things as attending church services and activities, doing volunteer work, following various rituals and ceremonies, saying prayers, and even having right theology have no spiritual value in themselves apart from true saving faith and honorable motives to glorify the Lord.

The person who trusts in those outward things sooner or later will expose his faithlessness with his mouth, because he **does not** have the inner power to **bridle his tongue**.

Trusting in those things to please God and receive His blessing are deceptive and **worthless**. Even if a ritual or liturgy is biblical in its wording, it is as futile as pagan idolatry unless the heart is right with the Lord. **A corrupt and unholy heart eventually will be exposed by corrupt and unholy speech.**

The tongue is not the only indicator of true spirituality but is one of the most reliable.

How, then, do we keep a tight rein on our tongue?

Based on what James has told us so far, we can be sure that we will not be able to talk our way out of this problem.

1. The beginning of developing a tight rein is putting into action the negative and positive actions that are required in 1:21: “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”
2. One of the ways that the “moral filth and evil” become apparent to others is by what flows from our mouth.

The genuineness of anyone’s **religion** is not determined by his or her own qualifications or standards but by God’s. The greatest spiritual mistake of the scribes, Pharisees, and other Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus was in that very regard.

They had replaced God’s standards in the Law with their own man-made traditions. Of such men Jesus said, “You invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me’” (Matt. 15:6b-8).

He deceives himself and his religion is worthless. (NIV) It is self-deception to have religious practices that do not lead to an ethical life-style.

In this verse, James points out a third dangerous deception:

(3) we are deceived when we accept our own rationalization that our beliefs can be kept inside or expressed in ritual with no real obedience.

Even our outward religious practices are worthless without obedience. And we cannot be obedient if we cannot control our mouth.

When both prove to be false, they merit the title of *worthless* that James gives them. Pretending to be religious and convincing ourselves that we are is not only deceptive to others, it is also a deadly self-deception. Conversion is meaningless unless it leads to a changed life. A changed life goes nowhere unless it serves others.

James presents a powerful challenge to a world more and more tolerant of the idea that religion is whatever the individual makes it—self-designed faith is worthless. Believing in a God we refuse to submit to or obey is just another expression of sinful rebellion.

JAMES 1:27

From a religion easily capable of rationalizing any behavior, James now turns to a relationship where God is allowed to direct the terms of behavior—**Religion pure and undefiled.** (NRSV)

James explains religion in terms of practical service and personal purity. Rituals done with reverence are not wrong; but if a person still refuses to obey God in daily life, his “religion” is not accepted by God. What is accepted by God? Telling ourselves that God is not aware of our real attitude towards him and his Word is, as James keeps reminding us, self-deception.

A. Willingness to Apply the Word without Selfishness

Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, (1:27a)

1. The first proper reaction to the Word of God is the willingness to apply it to one's life without selfishness, with genuine concern for the welfare of others, especially those in great need. **Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is to serve them with love and compassion.** Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

James is not speaking of what may seem best to us, best to the world, or even best to fellow believers, but what is best **in the sight of our God and Father.**

Our conduct must be in keeping with our faith (1 Corinthians 5:8). Jesus' touching lepers when he healed them is a vivid example of this type of action. James presents two simple and practical actions of obedient faith that almost anyone can take.

To care for orphans and widows in their distress. (NRSV) This is an illustration of how our Christian *conduct* should look. Caring for His people in order to help, strengthen, and encourage them

Orphans and widows are often mentioned in the concerns of the early church because these were the most obviously "poor" in first-century Israel.

Generally, the neediest people in the early church were **orphans and widows.** There were no life insurance or welfare programs to support them.

- By caring for these powerless people, the church put God's Word into practice.
- To this group we can also add those who have become de facto widows and orphans through the death of families in divorce. These people have complicated lives. The needs always threaten to overwhelm our human resources. Looking after hurting people is stressful work. Yet we are called to be involved.
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**Willingness to Apply the Word without Compromise
and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (1:27b)**

- A. The third proper reaction to the Word of God is the willingness to apply it to one's life without moral or spiritual compromise.

To keep - indicating regular, continuous action. In other words, keeping oneself unstained by the world is the perpetual obligation of Christians, allowing for no exception or qualification.

Those who belong to God are to be characterized by moral and spiritual purity, by **unstained** and unblemished holiness.

To keep oneself unstained by the world. (NRSV)

This is a picture of how our Christian *character* should look. To keep ourselves from being polluted by the world, we need to commit ourselves to Christ's, not the world's.

We are not to adapt to the world's value system based on money, power, and pleasure.

True faith means nothing if we are contaminated with such values. The heart of Jesus' prayer was, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15 NIV).

As we make ourselves available to serve Christ in the world, we must keep putting ourselves under the protection of this prayer. It helps to replace the two "them" words with our name as we visualize Jesus praying for us.

The prayer makes two important points:

(1) we remain in the world because that is where Christ wants us; and (2) we will have God's protection.

*It is not our perfection that proves our salvation but rather our hating our imperfections and seeking, with God's help and power, to correct them. **In his inmost heart, the genuine Christian longs to speak and do only those things that are holy, pure, loving, honest, truthful, and upright, things that are uncorrupted and unstained by the world.***

On the other hand, a person who does not have compassion for others, who is not concerned about living righteously, and whose satisfaction is found in his sin, cannot be a true disciple of Christ and child of God.

*Godly **religion**, that is, biblical Christianity, is a matter of holy obedience to God's Word—reflected, among other ways, by our honesty in regard to ourselves, by our selflessness in regard to the needs of others, and by our uncompromising moral and spiritual stand in regard to the world*