

Introduction

About 50 years ago a popular book among Christians was titled "How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious." I hope we came to the conclusion last Sunday that it is not possible to be a Christian without being religious. James thinks of religion not as rituals but as the overflow of obedience and transformation in the lives of those who are in a relationship with Jesus Christ as savior and Lord. When we think of religion as James does, we have to agree that it is not possible to be a Christian without being religious. However, it is possible to be religious without being a Christian. So how do you know if your religion is that of a true Christian? Two verses in James chapter 1 answer that question.

[Read Text and Pray]

Last week we zeroed in on the idea that, from the biblical standpoint, religion is not a nasty word. If we understand religion as the life which issues forth from a vital relationship with God, then we have to reject the notion that relationship is incompatible with religion. If you are rightly related to God through Jesus Christ His Son, then you will be rightly relating to his word. You will be an attentive hearer. You will welcome his word into your heart. And you will DO the word. The DOING of the word is religious activity; it is religion. Well then we might ask, what does this religion look like? Are there hallmarks of such a life lived in the doing of the word? Are there distinguishing characteristics of righteous religion? Answering these questions is the main concern of James in this text. He declares that there is a kind of religion that is worthless, but there is also a kind that is worthwhile. It is vital that we know the difference. It is also vital that we live out the religion that is worth it. So I will present to you the substance of James's instruction here in James 1:26-27 under the heading of religion that is worth it.

I. The Marks of Religion That's Worth It.

James sets forth three marks which distinguish worthwhile religion from that which is worthless. The marks are identifying characteristics. If we are doing the word as he mentions in the preceding verses, here are three features of what that looks like.

A. First of all, James says that worthwhile religion is marked by a BRIDLED TONGUE. James actually presents this point in the negative. The person who thinks he is religious, but whose religion is in fact worthless, DOES NOT bridle his tongue. We legitimately therefore take from the statement that the person whose religion is worthwhile DOES bridle his tongue.

A bridled tongue is not a silent tongue, but it operates under control. Bridles exist for the purpose of control. Being quick to hear and slow to speak does not mean never speaking. It suggests careful well-thought-out speech. It does not absent-mindedly blurt out but carefully and thoughtfully with godly regulation, it speaks so as to bring truth and peace and preservation and care and wisdom and kindness and instruction. In a word a bridled tongue is controlled by love. Now James has a lot to say about this in chapter 3 so we will save significant elaboration for when we arrive there. At this time I will mention one thing James says there in chapter 3 verse 10. He notes, "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so." A controlled tongue will seek to multiply the blessing and eliminate the cursing. So think about it. How do we bless with our tongue? Praise to God, encouragement, timeliness, truth, grace, hope, extending forgiveness, joyful greetings, gentleness, expressing gratitude, humble instruction, redemptive

words, promoting peace, unity, offering loving correction. These are glorious streams of blessing from a bridled tongue.

On the other hand, an UNbridled tongue spouts forth with sarcasm, angry words, literal cursing, profanity, inappropriate for the context, inconsiderate, prideful, judgmental, promoting division, expressing hate, discouragement, deceit, promoting conflict and strife, gossip, slander, derogatory name-calling. Words like these are like darts and bullets. They go forth to wound and inflict. They tear down rather than building up.

What God says matters to God, and what we say matters to God. God created with words. The devil tempted with words. They can be life or they can be death. A life that proceeds from a relationship with God will be marked by a bridled tongue. Talk about rampant wickedness which James mentions in verse 21! Weeding is a never-ending job. So is bridling the tongue.

B. A second feature of worthwhile religion is "visiting orphans and widows in their affliction." Being an orphan or a widow is an affliction. It means that your parent or spouse has been removed from your life. Such an affliction was particularly grievous in ancient days to women and children. Women generally lacked the opportunity to make a living, and there was no social welfare. It placed them in a vulnerable position without protection or provision. Think of Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Naomi's husband took her and their two sons down to a foreign land because of a famine. While there the two sons married, but then all three men died. Naomi returned to the homeland and Ruth came with her, but they had nothing. Their only hope was the kindness of others. And there he was. Kind-hearted Boaz visited the widow Ruth in her affliction. He offered that she should glean in his fields only where he would make certain she was protected. He instructed his field hands to make sure she had all the grain she needed.

The Lord exhibits throughout the scripture a heart for people in this kind of condition. Exodus 22:22 contains the command, "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child." Listen to Deuteronomy 10:17-18: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing." Psalm 68:4-5 instructs us to "sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the LORD; exult before him! Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation."

To visit widows and orphans in their distress is to care personally and truly for them. It is to supply their necessities and assuage their sorrows and heartaches. It is to respond like Boaz did to Ruth. In fact this is the way God came to the aid of his people Israel. Languishing as they were in Egypt, they cried unto the Lord. And when the Lord called Moses, he said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them." This is also the way God responds to sinners when he saves. He sees us as prisoners and captives, as sheep without a shepherd, as spiritual widows and orphans. And he has come to our rescue. He has visited us in our affliction to bring salvation. Zechariah prophesied saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has VISITED and redeemed his people" (Luke 1:68). When Jesus raised the widow's son, the crowds exclaimed, "God has visited his people." You and I as sinners languish under the affliction of our guilt and shame. We are dead. But God. God what? God visits us in our distress and brings us out of spiritual Egypt. He brings us out of the place of spiritual hunger and thirst. He sets before us a table of provision,

the body and blood of Christ. And we who have been visited in such a way should be eager to display that same kindness to the vulnerable who surround us.

For us, visiting the widows and orphans is doing for others what God has done for us. It is action carried out as ministry to those in need. It is clear that one of the marks of a true Christian is ministry to the afflicted. Remember not long ago we were in Matthew 25 and saw Jesus's instruction about the final judgment. The marks of those who inherit the kingdom are these: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and coming to those in prison. We are not to reduce ourselves to mere social ministries. But we must have a heart for the afflicted and provide ministry to alleviate their suffering. If we do not, then our religion is not worthwhile.

C. James points to a third feature of worthwhile religion. Those who practice it keep themselves unstained by the world. They are not worldly. The "world" here is contrasted with "heaven." The Lord teaches us to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It is a request that God would help us to do his will as gladly and perfectly as the angels in heaven. Whatever acts are in opposition to the will of God are not of heaven but are of this world. They are worldly and stained by the world. We live in a world that has shut God out. Evil desires flow from darkened minds that hate the light. People of the world live according to an order overseen by Satan. This order is characterized by a worldview that shuts God out and by a lifestyle that corrupts what God made good. While on this earth God's children in Christ face constant pressure to cave in to the way of the world.

To love this world is to be at enmity with God. That is exactly what James says. Meanwhile, John writes that we should "not love the world or the things in the world; if anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him." Loving the world certainly refers to finding our worth in terms of the world and valuing the material things in the world. But it also applies to living in the ways of the world—selfish, angry, malicious, prideful, pleasure-driven, and sensual. Here James's point is if you claim to be religious but love the world and willingly allow the world to stain your life, your religion is worthless. It displeases God. Do not fool yourself. You don't love God if you love the world.

So you don't love the world, but you find yourself in the world, sometimes caught up in the things of the world. You truly love Jesus but sometimes you sin against him. Should you think your religion is worthless? Should you begin to despair? Listen, our religion will never be perfect until we are in glory. Meanwhile, a battle rages against our souls, and sometimes we will sin. It is never acceptable, but it is a reality. When we cave in to our evil desires, we must take ourselves to the One to whom we came to be saved. He will cleanse us yet again. In repentance we will sin less and less and our determination remains to be unstained by the world. Each day we must submit ourselves again to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him and resist being conformed to the world but continue to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Therefore, repudiate the world. Flee from evil desires and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart.

So these are the marks of worthwhile religion according to James—bridle the tongue, care for the needy, and pursue holiness. He is not giving us a complete picture, but he is reminding us that whatever else our religion may look like, if either of these marks is missing, our religion is useless and worthless.

II. The Character of Religion That's Worth It.

A. The religion or lifestyle that possess these marks is said to be "pure and undefiled." That is its character, and that's what makes it worth it. It is religion that God accepts, with which he is pleased. The Old Testament sacrificial system called for sacrifices that were without blemish, pure and undefiled. Such were acceptable to him. Only the best was to be offered to the pure and undefiled God.

B. The fact is that all human beings are anything but pure and undefiled. And our righteousness is nothing better than filthy rags. We never have anything to offer God that is truly pure and undefiled. It is all tainted, corrupted, and polluted by our sin. The glorious truth of the gospel is that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because God has done what the law could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who turn from sin and trust in the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. We also get the Spirit of God and when we live according to his leading and power we can please God. Our lives become a pleasing offering to God. Our lives are an act of worship. Our spiritual worship is to present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him, as we do his good, acceptable, and perfect will.

This is the character of worthwhile religion. It is good, acceptable, and perfect because of God's mercy by his magnificent working in His Son Jesus Christ. He who has the Son has the life. But he who does not have the Son shall not see life. Your religion can never be pure and undefiled before God if you are not in Christ. And to be in Christ, what you must do is to repent of sin, turn away from it and cast yourself upon the work Christ performed through his life, death, and resurrection. Trust in him, and God will count you and your religion pure and undefiled because he will see it though Christ's sin atoning work.

III. The Heart of Religion That's Worth It.

R. C. Sproul tells of a vivid memory involving his mother. He writes,

I remember Mama standing in front of me, her hands poised on her hips, her eyes glaring with hot coals of fire and saying in stentorian tones, "Just what is the big idea, young man?"

Sproul explains:

Instinctively I knew my mother was not asking me an abstract question about theory. Her question was not a question at all—it was a thinly veiled accusation. Her words were easily translated to mean, "Why are you doing what you are doing?" She was challenging me to justify my behavior with a valid idea. I had none.

As for me, My mom with different words said the same thing, and your mom probably said it to you as well. "What do you think you are doing?" Thank God for moms! So much of childhood is DOING without THINKING. We have to be awakened to the fact that what we do matters and why we do what we do matters just as much. James is telling us here that our religion matters. The lives we live matter. And the reason that they matter so much is because God is watching. He has got to be the reason we do what we do.

Coram Deo is a Latin phrase that means in the presence of God or before the face of God. Everything about us is before God's face. He knows what we do and why we do it. We should strive for religion that is pure and undefiled according to his estimation. James tells us that pure religion includes bridling the tongue, caring for the needy, and keeping ourselves unstained by the world

because these marks matter to God, the Father. The heart of worthwhile religion answers the question, "What's the big idea?" Or "What do you think you are doing?" It gets to WHY you do what you do. And why our religion needs to bear these three marks is because these three marks matter to God, the Father. And the reason these marks matter to God, the Father is they are inherent to his own nature. God possesses these characteristics. They are part of the divine nature. And he caused us to be born again so that we would be like him and would be a human reflection of his glory both as his worshipers and as his children.

For a minute we need to go back to verse 18. "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." Here are three aspects of the new birth. God brought us forth, one, by his own will, two, by the word of truth, and three, that we should be a kind of first fruits. We see about God his kind determination to help the needy. Of his own will he brought us forth. His kind-hearted mercy for the helpless is what led him to determine to do us good. We see about God the power of his tongue. It was by his word, the word of truth, that he brought us forth. And we see about God his intention that we be holy, set apart to him as firstfruits.

Now, consider that what pleases God in our religion corresponds to these three acts of God in giving us life. First, it was by his WORD that he gave us life and blessing, and he is pleased by our controlling our tongues so that our words give life and bless the people who hear our speech. Second, it was out of our Father's pity for the needy and desperate that he chose to bring us forth and make us his children. As he demonstrates care for the pitiful and helpless, so should we. Third, the work of bringing us forth had the purpose that we should be holy to him, and we reflect this purpose by keeping ourselves unstained by the world. You see, pure and undefiled religion for us is reflecting the character of God.

And then I want you to see that there are two motives which are woven into the fabric of worthwhile religion. Religion that is pure and undefiled is energized by the desire to worship a glorious God and be like a loving Father. We come back to verse 27 and take note of the fact that the one before whom we perform the works of religion is designated as God, the Father. He is at the same time the One True and almighty God AND our Father. Worshipers become like what they worship. And beloved children become like the parents they love. In both cases it is what they want to do! Now this insight here really stokes my fire! And I hope I can convey it to you so that you grasp it enthusiastically as well.

Worshipers become like what we worship. Psalm 135:18 says "Those who make [idols] become like them, so do all who trust in them." Likewise, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." In worship we stand in awe of our glorious God; we declare his praise; we bless the name of the Lord. We attest that we admire his beauty. And if we find God to be beautiful, we will want to emulate that beauty in ourselves not contradict it. Here is help for the battle with sin. Delivered and empowered by the Spirit our want-to to put sin to death will be intensified by our worship. You see, if you worship God, if you stand in awe and amazement of him in part because he speaks life with his words, how could you not want to bridle your tongue so that your words speak life as well? If you stand in awe of God as one who cares deeply for the needy, as evidenced in his saving you, how could you not want to cultivate a heart of mercy toward the needy as well? If you are brought to your knees in adoration because God is holy, holy, holy and saved you to be holy to him, how could you not want to be holy in all your conduct?

And there is another motivation as well. It is the motivation of fatherhood. James designates the Lord as God, the Father. We have been brought forth by the Father. In love he has adopted children into his family. As God we worship him in awe. As father we delight in a relationship of intimate love. Whom we extol as God, we delight in as our Abba. And we want to be like our Abba. Paul exhorts the Ephesians, "Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children." This religion is not a duty. It is not a collection of hollow rituals. It is rooted in the heart. It derives from an awe of the glory of God but also from the tender devotion of a caring Father. Take this consciousness into the battle every day to control your tongue, to be merciful to the needy, and to prevent the stain of worldly passions.

IV. The Value of Religion That's Worth It.

A. James throughout this letter is concerned about people who falsely believe they are right with God. He puts it here in terms of people who think they are religious but whose religion is worthless. That religion is marked by an absence of a bridled tongue. It is marked by an absence of care for the needy. It is marked by an absence of the pursuit of holiness. Perhaps for these it is pure ritual. They go to church. They read the Bible. They perform ritual ceremonies. Like the Pharisees, their religion is a sham before God. They deceive their hearts. People like this need to wake up. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you. You need to flee from that love and love Christ. You need to repent and delight instead in the will of God. Here is an earnest warning.

B. The warning of James, however, should not cause undue fear for those whose lives reflect these marks even if they are dim. Even if these marks are dim, they are there. What James is saying, however, should inflame your zeal, inflame your desire, and inflame your diligence to grow in these aspects of pure and undefiled religion to the glory of God and the joy of your soul.

Conclusion

So as James makes it clear, you can be religious without being a Christian, but you can't be a Christian without being religious. Becoming a true Christian starts with the repentance of sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Out of conversion will flow pure and undefiled religion. That religion is not a life of empty ritual. It is a life overflowing with the awe of God and the love for an incredibly loving Father. It is a life lived to reflect God's glory and the Father's likeness in speech, care, and conduct.