

True Religion

Hearing and Doing Part 6
James 1:26-27 2-8-2015

Summary: Being a doer of the Word (true religion) means controlling the tongue, caring for orphans and widows, and avoiding being stained by the world.

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James 1:26 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.¹

Introduction

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, then He created a man and a woman and put them in a garden paradise as husband and wife. He gave them one simple command, and they rebelled and broke that command so they were expelled from the garden. That is the story of how this world got so messed up. That is the first three chapters of the Bible. Now, if you were God, what would you put in chapter 4? What is the very first thing you want to say to mankind after you have explained how the world got started?

Adam and Eve have kids, then what? We don't know because decades pass without anything being recorded. Cain and Abel grow up and become adults, and all their years growing up not one single thing happens that God decided to record in Scripture. But one day something happened, and it was so important that God said, "Right there – that's going into Bible. People will open their Bibles and read about the creation and the fall of mankind into sin, and the next thing I want them to read is this event on this day."

"What happened?"

¹ I am preaching this passage from the ESV translation because the NIV and HCSB both make an adjustment to the grammar, and I didn't want to take the time in the sermon to explain it. In the Greek, the "If..then"" structure is this way: "IF anyone considers himself religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, THEN his religion is worthless." So the deceiving of the heart is part of the "if" not part of the "then." But in the NIV and HCSB, the deception part comes after the "then."

Here is what happened: two people came to worship God, and God accepted the worship of one of them and rejected the worship of the other one.

Now, what does that tell you? The very first thing that God wants to say to us when the human race is starting out in this fallen world is this: “Here is an example of acceptable worship and here is an example of unacceptable worship.” The most important thing in life is worship, and God does not accept all worship. God wants us to understand that the most important question in life is, “Does God accept my worship, or does He reject it?”

Later on, when God gave His law to His people, He went on for chapter after chapter after chapter with descriptions of what is clean and acceptable in religion, and what is defiled and unclean and unacceptable in religion. Sometimes our eyes glaze over when we read those chapters because there is so much detail. But God wanted to set up an elaborate system that touched on every single detail of life so that we would understand that every second of every minute of every hour of every day we must be engaging in acceptable religion and not unacceptable religion. All of life is an effort to engage in true, undefiled, acceptable religion. And so this little paragraph at the end of James chapter 1 is immensely valuable to us, because look what James says in verse 27.

James 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this...

We come today in our verse by verse study of James to some direct instruction on the most important topic there is. Every one of you is here this morning because you are religious. But the big question in life is not whether or not you're religious. The big question is whether or not your religion is acceptable and pleasing to God, or defiled and rejected by God. And this passage is designed to help us with that.

Religion

26 If anyone considers himself religious ...

I need to define that word translated **religious**. Sometimes we use the word *religion* to refer to a belief system or a body of doctrine – like the Muslim religion or the Hindu religion. But that is not what this word means. This word refers to religious observance – all the various things that you do to express fear of God and worship of God. It is how you behave toward God.

And James is speaking specifically here about Christian religion. And that is very obvious just two verses later, where he identifies the religion as faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

He is not talking to pagans. He is talking to Christians who have actually placed their faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

So when he says, “If anyone considers himself to be religious,” in our vernacular it's like saying, “If anyone considers himself to be a committed, practicing Christian...” James is going to give us the definition of a practicing Christian. George Barna defines a practicing Christian as anyone who says faith in Christ is very important to their lives and they go to church. I think that is about how most people would define it - going to church, reading your Bible.

We have been talking about putting what you learn into practice – every day after your devotions write down, “Today I will...,” and describe the specific actions you plan to take to implement what you just learned. And last week some people were asking, “What kinds of things qualify as *doing*? Churchgoing, Bible reading - is that what it means to be a doer of the Word?” James' answer is no. You need those things to learn how to become a doer, but here is what the actual doing looks like:

James 1:26 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.

If you are not doing those things, you are not a practicing Christian. George Barna is forever coming out with polls that say the behavior of practicing Christians in our country is no different than the behavior of non-Christians. He says the divorce rate among practicing Christians is the same as it is in the

world. Or the same percentage of practicing Christians look at pornography as people in the world. You have to wonder if George Barna ever read the book of James. I think if James ever met Barna he would say, “George, these conclusions you’re coming up with are nonsense.” If their behavior isn’t any different, then, by definition, they aren’t practicing Christians. If your Christianity doesn’t reach as far as your speech, love, and purity, then it doesn’t exist.

James is so practical. He never wants to leave anything in the abstract. First he tells us, “Receive the word,” then he says, “And by *receive the word* I mean do it.” And then he says, “By *do the word* I mean obey God’s law.” And then he says, “By *obey God’s law* I mean do things like control your tongue and help the needy and avoid worldliness.”

Religion is Good

That is true religion, and that’s a very good thing. The popular thing in our culture these days is for people to say, “I’m not religious, but I’m very spiritual.” Who knows what they mean by “spiritual”? In most cases it is probably just the way they can reject religion without sounding like a bad person. Many people in our culture just don’t like the idea of religion so one popular strategy among Christians trying to share the gospel is to say things like, “Christianity isn’t a religion. It’s a relationship.” There was a Christian guy who made a YouTube video a couple years ago titled “Why I hate Religion.” He starts out by saying Jesus came to abolish religion. They say things like that because they want to relate to those people who are rejecting Christianity because they are against “organized” religion.

Is that a good strategy? No, it’s not. It is a bad strategy because true religion is a good thing, not a bad thing. According to James, true religion is the goal. And Jesus never rebuked anyone for being religious. He rebuked religious hypocrites, not for being religious but for being hypocritical.

Is Christianity a relationship? Yes, but it is a religious relationship. God is not just our neighbor. He is our Creator and he is to be worshiped with reverence and awe and fear. We can’t just throw out religion, because religion is the way we behave toward God. It is the external expression of what we believe.

Christianity is most certainly a relationship. But can you think of any love relationship where the external expressions are unimportant? If your wife came up and gave you a big hug and a passionate kiss, would you say, “What’s with all the external trappings and physical, outward expressions of marriage? You’re such a legalist. Don’t you realize relationships are an issue of the heart, not external, physical rituals?” If you said to your wife, “Look, I don’t give you flowers, I don’t say, ‘I love you,’ I don’t ever help you with the dishes or smile at you because those things are all outward, external things, and relationships are a matter of the heart,” what do you think she would say? She might say, “You’re right. Relationships are a matter of the heart. And obviously there’s no love in your heart for me.” You see, there is no such thing as unexpressed love. If it is not expressed, then there is no relationship.

Root and Fruit

And this is a good message for a church like ours, where we emphasize heart issues so much. Here’s why I say that: The church today is filled with shallow remedies. Preachers stand up and say, “Stop being so angry,” but they don’t help you discover the underlying heart issues causing your anger – like wrong attitudes about suffering or out-of-control desire. They focus on symptoms and not the disease. They say, “Stop worrying so much,” but they don’t teach you how find the root causes of the worry, like self-reliance or a wrong understanding of the nature of God. So often people deal on the surface with external actions, but they neglect the heart. And that is a huge mistake.

So a church like Agape comes along and presses hard on the importance the heart. We are really big on digging down and getting to the root. If your car is sputtering and won’t go over 20 mph, you don’t solve the problem by just hooking up to a tow truck that can pull you faster. If you really want to solve the problem you tear into the motor and figure out what’s wrong there. That is what we do with our spiritual lives.

But there is a danger in that. As we react to the error of dealing only on the surface, we can go too far the other direction and focus *only* on the heart, and fail to give any attention to our actions. We focus so much on the root that we forget that the Bible really does have a whole lot to say about both root *and* fruit. And we can fall into the error of thinking any time we are dealing with actions, it's superficial. That's not true. Deal with the heart, for sure. But even after you have taken care of the heart issues, bearing fruit still requires some intentional effort. It requires thought and planning and work. Just fixing the engine does not make the car go fast – you have to fix the engine, and then actually get in the car and put your foot on the gas. Some Christians spend all day every day under the hood in their Christian life. They are constantly giving their heart a tune-up, but they never actually get in the car and put their foot on the gas and drive. So let's take a look at what it looks like to get in the car and drive.

Three Examples of Doing

James is going to mention three aspects of what it looks like to drive the car of true religion. Look at the three topics he brings up:

- 1) controlling your tongue
- 2) showing love to the needy
- 3) avoiding worldliness

That is actually an outline for the rest of the main body of the book of James.

Controlling the tongue – that's chapter 3.

Showing love to the needy – that's chapter 2.

Avoiding worldliness – that's chapter 4.

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So he will go into a lot of detail later, on each one of these topics. But he mentions all three briefly here to show us why he is going to talk about these topics in detail. The whole main body of the book of James is describing what it looks like to be a doer of the Word. And he starts with the tongue.

Speech

James 1:26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his religion is worthless.

If you want to be a doer of the Word, take a look at your speech because doing includes talking. Being a doer of the Word means your talking conforms to the perfect law of God. You have not put God's Word into practice until you start talking differently. Your religion - your way of worshiping God - has an effect on the way you dress when you come to church. It has an effect on the way you act when we are singing praise songs. But does it have an effect on what comes out of your mouth when the waitress messes up your order? Does your religion have an impact on what comes out of your mouth when someone cuts you off in traffic? Does it have an impact on what you say when all your coworkers are gathered around complaining about the boss? Does your worship have an effect on what comes out of your mouth right after your spouse does something really disrespectful or unloving, or your kids are disobedient and break something really expensive? If not, James says, your religion is worthless.

That word translated **worthless** is a term that is very often used in connection with idolatry and paganism. If your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ doesn't have any impact on your speech patterns, it is no better than Hinduism or Islam or Buddhism or any other false religion. It is utterly unacceptable to God.

Types of Sinful Speech

The people James is writing to had all kinds of problems in their speech. Hypocritical speech, hostile speech, slander, fighting, quarreling, judging. They are praying selfish prayers. They are boasting, they

are swearing oaths, which is a mark of dishonesty. There are a lot of ways to sin with your mouth. James doesn't even address them all. There is also complaining, grumbling, gossip, profanity, obscenity, coarse joking, rude speech, mindless chatter – so many ways we sin with our mouth.

So what is James saying? If you ever do any of that then you are lost? No. In chapter 3 he says that we all stumble in many ways in our speech. He is not saying true Christians never stumble. But he is saying that if you are going to be a doer of the Word, it is going to have an effect on your speech, because talking counts as doing. Talking is part of your behavior. Talking is part of your religion. When Cain and Abel came to worship God, they both put a sacrifice on the altar. And one was accepted and the other was rejected. Whenever we open our mouths, what comes out is a gift laid on the altar as worship to God. It is either acceptable worship or unacceptable worship, but either way it is a part of our religious expression.

So if unbelievers speak with their mouths and Christians sin with their mouths, what is the difference? Here is what it looks like in a fake Christian: Something happens, they get upset, a bunch of verbal diarrhea comes out of their mouth, and they just make excuses.

“I'm just really tired today.”

“I had a rough day at work.”

“You kept pressuring me and nagging me and you pushed me into it.”

“I didn't really mean what I said.”

“You said plenty of hurtful things to me, too.”

One excuse after another.

Or, if they want to reconcile the relationship they might make a more serious sounding apology. But there is no real concern about changing what is wrong in their heart. They just kind of shrug their shoulders, and say, “I'll try harder next time.” But next time it's going to be exactly the same because they haven't taken any steps to change their heart. That is the rule rather than the exception in the life of the fake Christian when they sin in their speech. No real repentance.

What about a true Christian? What do we do after we have stumbled into sin with our mouths? You get angry, you give in to sinful impulses, a bunch of garbage comes out of your mouth, and then, at some point, you come to your senses. You realize you have displeased and dishonored God and you are grieved about it. You confess your sin to God and to whichever people were involved. No excuses, no blame shifting - just humble confession, and you ask their forgiveness. And so you search your heart to discover what heart issue was at the root of those sinful words. Then you look to the Scriptures to find out how to change your heart in that area. And you take some specific steps to change because you love the Lord and you want to be pleasing to Him. And because the Holy Spirit has convicted your heart and you want to be responsive to Him. And over time those steps will start to have an effect and there will be a difference in your speech patterns.

Neglected Verse

James 1:26 has to be one of the most ignored verses in the Bible. I have seen people doubt their salvation for all kinds of other sins, but does anybody ever question the genuineness of their faith because of their speech patterns? There are people in the church who are considered strong, mature believers, but if you followed them around at work or at school you would hear obscenity, profanity, lying, angry, abusive words, gossip, slander, boasting. And they might have little tinges of guilt over some of it, but does anybody ever say, “According to James 1:26, there's a question mark on whether or I'm even saved.”? This verse just is not taken very seriously by most people.

Self-Deception

And it was probably that way in James' day as well, which would explain why James calls it self-deception. The grammar of verse 26 actually calls for the word *instead* after the word *but*.

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but instead deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

There are only two options for the person claiming to be a Christian: bridle your tongue or deceive your heart. This is the third time James has warned us about self-deception. In verse 16 he warned us about being deceived by temptation. In verse 22 he warned us about being deceived into thinking that just listening and learning equals spiritual growth. So someone says, "Okay, I will be a doer of the Word." And he starts doing all kinds of religious stuff, but there is no change in his speech patterns - James says, "You're right back to deceiving yourself. If you think you are a doer of the Word just because you're doing all that religious stuff, and it's not having an impact on your speech, you're delusional." Jesus was clear in Matthew 12:34 that the things that come out of our mouth come from the heart, which means it is impossible to have a good heart and a bad mouth.

Bridle

So what does it mean to bridle your tongue? Notice he says bridle, not muzzle. We have all heard the advice - If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all. A closed mouth gathers no feet. But that is not what James is saying here. He is not telling us to muzzle our speech; he's telling us to bridle it. A muzzle means just don't open your mouth. A bridle refers to control. If you put a bit and bridle on a horse, it's not so you can make the horse dormant and motionless. Just the opposite. The horse can still walk and run and jump and work and do all kinds of things. The difference is, with a bridle the horse is under control so that it can be useful. Without a bridle it just does whatever it feels like doing.

The tongue is an incredibly powerful thing. Think of the power you have in your mouth. You can open up your mouth and present the gospel to someone and the result could be that they spend eternity in heaven instead of in hell. You just stand there and say some words and it can result in eternal salvation. The tongue can bring healing, comfort, wisdom, insight, encouragement, strength, renewal, and life. But it can also bring pain, confusion, discouragement, devastation, and death. It is like nuclear power - it can provide electricity for a whole city or blow up a whole city.

So what determines if your tongue is a bomb or a power plant? Self-control. If you are a Christian, you have lots of good desires. You desire to glorify God, to honor the Lord Jesus Christ, to show love to His people, to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord - all kinds of good desires. And we also have sinful desires, don't we? James talked about that back in verse 14. And typically, it is the sinful desires that are realized when we just act on impulse. And obtaining the good desires requires some self-control. If you don't exercise self-control with your tongue, it will just run around like a wild horse acting on impulse. And it will be like a bomb blowing up a city. But if we really love God, we are going to want to harness that energy and put it to good use. That is what it means to bridle your tongue. Instead of just speaking whenever you have an impulse to speak, give careful thought to how you can accomplish good things with your speech.

Mercy

27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...

Orphans and widows represent the most helpless and needy among us. Throughout Scripture you see God having special care and compassion for orphans and widows. Anyone who is in trouble and has no one to help them protect them or provide for them draws the most tender compassion from the heart of God. And if you are a true child of God, it will draw your compassion as well. The very first organized

ministry in the church is a ministry to widows in Acts 6. The book of 1 Timothy is all about how to run a church, and 22% of that book is devoted to ministry to widows. God cares about people who are in need. And if my religion does not extend as far as my wallet and my daytimer, that it is not acceptable to God. If you have some kind of faith in Jesus Christ that doesn't move you to help those who are in need, it's worthless.

This is nothing new with James. God made this crystal-clear all the way through the Old Testament. In the very first chapter of Isaiah, the people were offering sacrifices and carrying out all the things God had told him to do in the Temple. They were doing all the rituals God had told him to do, and yet it was not acceptable to God. In fact God couldn't stand it, because they weren't also caring for orphans and widows.

Isaiah 1:13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. 14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates.

17 learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

When you see someone in trouble, and your heart is not moved with compassion to help that person, your religion is defiled and unacceptable in God's sight. Compassion for those in need and a giving, generous heart is a mark of true faith in Jesus Christ.

Matthew 25:34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ... 40 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'"

Care for the needy is fundamental to Christian faith. It is one of the most natural things in the whole Christian life. When we first planted this church, at the very beginning before we had any children's ministry or youth ministry, before we even had live music - right from the very start we had a benevolence ministry. Most of the time when I try to start something new it flops. But starting the benevolence ministry was easy. All I had to do was say, "If anyone wants to give to help people in need, put some money in the box and write benevolence on the memo line." And people did it, and they have been doing it ever since. We have never had to badger or cajole you to give to benevolence. I mention it once in a while, but we never make a big push. And yet there has never been a single time in history of our church when someone had a need and we had to tell them, "Sorry, there's no money in the benevolence fund." Giving to help those in need is one of the most natural things you can do as a Christian to express your love for Christ. And if you would like to do more than just give money, you would like to give some of your time and really help people face-to-face, I would urge you to join the benevolence team. That is a ministry that is so close to the heart of God.

If you are thinking about adopting an orphan, that is one of the sweetest acts of worship of the Lord Jesus Christ you could possibly do. The same goes for volunteering at Life Choices crisis pregnancy center, or doing what you can to save babies who are going to be killed by their mothers. If a child's parents are dead, we should have compassion on that child. But if a child's parents want him dead, that's even worse!

And James is telling us, if that kind of thing doesn't move your heart enough to step in and do something, your religion has flat lined.

What does it look like to be a doer of the Word? Doing includes talking. And doing includes helping. And one more – doing includes purity.

Purity

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.

Doing the Word includes separating from the world. Now obviously, when James refers to the world here, he is not talking about the physical planet - mountains and trees and rivers. He is talking about the lifestyle of unbelievers. The dominant, accepted way of living and thinking and feeling in the culture around us – that’s the world.

Each society creates its own makeshift morality. They don’t want to submit to God’s way so they invent their own system of right and wrong. Becoming stained by the world is when you start buying into that system.

For example, here is our culture’s makeshift morality: Pride and self-esteem are considered virtues. God says they are evil. In our culture, anger is reasonable or unreasonable based on how much you have been hurt. If someone hurts you in a really big way, you are justified in being angry. God says all selfish anger is sin, and we are to remain softhearted and kind even toward our enemies. Our culture says sex between consenting adults is perfectly natural and there’s no reason to restrict it to marriage. God says there are two options: get married or stay celibate. Our culture says the American dream is all about money and possessions and climbing up the ladder at work. God says money and possessions are a dangerous trap and they can never make you happy, and the goal in life is to move down the ladder to become everybody’s servant. Our culture says there might be a God out there somewhere, but he is not involved in day-to-day life. Life is what you make it. God says whether you eat or drink or whatever you do it must be done for His glory. Our culture says that the most reliable source of truth is science. God says the most reliable source of truth is His Word. Our culture says that profanity and obscenity are cool and funny. God says it’s vile and He forbids it.

The problem is, when you listen to enough of their music, and watch enough of their movies and TV shows, and read enough of their books and blogs and magazine articles, and you develop friendships with them and hang out with them long enough, their ways of thinking start to leak into your soul. The writers in Hollywood are so incredibly skilled at taking those worldly ideas and making them seem reasonable good. And we can get so that when we present God’s Word to people we almost feel like we need to apologize for it because it sounds so ridiculous. When you expose yourself to the world’s influences enough so that your heart begins to attach itself to them, that is what it means to be stained by the world. You are stained by the world when it leaves its mark on you - it leaves its mark on your attitudes and desires.

And one of the marks of true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a constant, concerted effort to avoid that. We are to walk through this world and come out unspotted and unstained. Imagine a surgeon who operates on someone dying of some terrible, infectious disease. After the surgery, when he walks out of there, is he stained with blood or infected with the disease? No – he was careful to wear gloves and a mask and gown, so that he walks out completely unstained. That is how we are to be in the world. Too often we immerse ourselves in this world without any precautions to protect our hearts.

A lot of Christians have a hard time taking this last one seriously because it sounds to them too much like legalism or fundamentalism. They say, “We are supposed to win the lost. We need to get down in the trenches with unbelievers to win them to Christ. So if I do that, along the way I pick up a few habits, say a few four letter words, drink a little too much - what’s the big deal? Christianity is not just a bunch of rules, and I have freedom in Christ...” People think that way and so it’s hard for them to think of worldliness as being that big a deal. What they fail to realize is that your relationship to the world is a mark of loyalty or disloyalty to God. James will explain that in some more detail in chapter 4. The picture that James paints is that God is the husband, we are the wife, and the world is another man. So any love or attraction we have to the world is like committing adultery against God. Worldliness is bad, not because you are breaking traditions or rules, but because you are being unfaithful to your husband in heaven.

If some attractive woman tries to seduce me, my answer should be, “No. I’m married. And I’m going to remain faithful to my wife.” And if the world comes along and wants me to talk like them and think

like them and share their values and attitudes, my answer should be, “No. I belong to God. I’m going to remain faithful to Him.” Avoiding worldliness is all about your relationship with God.

Will we stumble? Of course. But if we love the Lord we will repent when that happens, and declare war on our adulterous attraction to the world. The phony Christian is content to just remain as he is.

“I will come to church, and I will read my Bible, and I will sing the songs and take communion, but religion needs to stay within those boundaries. I don’t want it sticking its nose into my bedroom. It’s not going to dictate what I do for living. It’s not going to restrict my vocabulary when I’m having fun with my friends. It’s not going to worm its way into my finances - I have enough trouble paying the bills as it is. I’m happy to be religious and believe in Jesus Christ as long as He stays in His place and leaves the rest of my life alone.”

James says, “If that’s you, the faith that you think you have in Jesus is absolutely worthless.”

I think a lot of people, if they were honest, would have to admit that they had never even noticed the second half of verse 27. The first half tends to get all the press. If you talk to someone who is familiar with the book of James and you ask, “What did James say is pure and undefiled religion?” they will typically respond, “Caring for orphans and widows.” And somehow they miss the part about being unstained by the world.

That is especially true in liberal churches. One thing about the liberals, they tend to be really big on charity and altruism and philanthropy. But they are usually not very big on purity or avoiding worldliness or controlling the tongue. They are volunteering at soup kitchens, they show up for work day at church, two or three nights a week they are at someone’s house helping them out with something – but if you could see their inner thought life, it would make a black mark on a piece of coal. They have completely let themselves go on the inside, and they are counting on their servanthood to redeem them. Do an outreach to the homeless during the day, and then get drunk or sleep with their girlfriend at night.

And sometimes it works the other way. In many cases, people in conservative churches tend to be really big on avoiding worldliness and controlling the tongue, but not as concerned about helping people in need. And James won’t let us get away with either one of those. He wants us to hit the streets and help those in need, and he wants us to remain morally pure and unstained by the world.

Conclusion

That brings us to the end of chapter 1. He started by teaching us how to interpret suffering. Your life will never be the same once you learn the right way to interpret suffering in your life. From there he taught us about temptation.

“Don’t be deceived into thinking you can get something good from a sin. True good and happiness and well-being come only from God.”

When we are tempted to sin, the thing that we are looking for is a better, richer, fuller life. And so James explains to us that life comes only from God through His Word. So if you want to be happy, you want fulfillment, you want life - receive the Word. And receiving it means looking intently into it long enough to remember it so that you actually do it. And doing it means letting it change your heart to the point where it controls your speech, letting it change your heart to the point where it moves you to love those in need, and letting it change your heart to the point where you remain loyal and faithful to God rather than falling in love with this world. Those are the headlines. The next three chapters will take us through those topics in depth.

Benediction: Hebrews 13:20 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, 21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Application Questions (James 1:25)

1. Which of the three (bridling the tongue, helping the needy, or keeping unstained by the world) do you find most encouraging (evidence of genuine faith in your life)?
2. Which do you think the Lord would have you give most attention to at this time in your life?
3. In that area, would you be willing to commit to make a step toward changing? (“This week I will...”) As the group to help you think of a good step to take.

Devotionals

Day 1

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

S is for Seek

Psalm 119:176 I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.

All our seeking after God will be worthless if He does not seek us. Begin by asking God to come near to you.

I is for Incline

Psalm 119:36 Incline my heart toward your statutes.

Inclination has to do with what you like and dislike. We do not observe life with a detached, robotic analysis. We have a sense of liking and being attracted to some things and disliking and being inclined away from others.

Before you open your Bible take a moment to remind yourself that you could begin reading, come across some wonderful truth about God, and be bored by it. Horror! What could be worse than being unable to be delighted by the glory of God? Before reading, ask the Lord to incline your heart toward whatever it is He is about to show you so that when you see it you will love it.

O is for Open

Psalm 119:18 Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

When you read something in Scripture about God and it does not thrill your soul and cause great joy, peace, comfort, or awe, there is only one explanation: your eyes are blind to what is wonderful about that truth. Every truth about God in Scripture would absolutely thrill you if your eyes were opened to see what is so wonderful about it. And only God can do that. So before reading, pray—"God, open my eyes."

U is for Unite

Psalm 86:11 Unite my heart, that I may fear your name.

When we come to the Word of God, we usually come with a scattered, distracted heart. We must pray, "Dear God, please unite my heart so for this brief little time I can focus my entire being on You."

S is for Satisfy

Psalm 90:14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

The presence of God is like food—it always satisfies the soul. If you go away from your time in the Word unsatisfied, then, it is because you did not experience the presence of God. It is good, before we open the Bible, to remind ourselves of the purpose of coming to God’s banquet table. The goal is not just to gather information, but to leave the table with our souls satisfied!

Scripture Reading:

Read carefully and prayerfully through Matthew 7:21-29. The two houses represent the men’s lives. Think through what the storms represent, and what the falling with a great crash means. What is the one difference between the man whose house is on the rock and the one whose house is on the sand?

Sermon segment:

The very first thing that God tells us after describing how the world got started is this: “Here is an example of acceptable worship; and here is an example of unacceptable worship.” The most important thing in life is worship, and God does not accept all worship. God wants us to understand that the most important question in life is, “Does God accept my worship, or does He reject it?”

James 1:26 If anyone considers himself religious ...

Sometimes we use the word *religion* to refer to a belief system or a body of doctrine – like the Muslim religion or the Hindu religion. But that’s not what this word means. This word refers to religious observance – all the various things that you do to express fear of God and worship of God. It’s how you behave toward God.

And James is talking to Christians who have actually placed their faith in the glorious Lord Jesus Christ (2:1). So it’s like saying, “If anyone considers himself to be a committed, practicing Christian...” James is going to give us the definition of a practicing Christian. George Barna defines a practicing Christian as anyone who says faith in Christ is very important to their lives and they go to church (which is why Barna keeps coming up with surveys in which “practicing Christians” are no different in their behavior from the world).

James would disagree.

James 1:26 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.

If your Christianity doesn’t reach as far as your speech, love, and purity, then it doesn’t exist.”

James is so practical. He never wants to leave anything in the abstract. First he tells us, “Receive the word,” then he says, “And by *receive the word* I mean do it.” And then he says, “By *do the word* I mean obey God’s law.” And then he says, “By *obey God’s law* I mean do things like control your tongue and help the needy and avoid worldliness.”

Religion is a good thing. Christianity is most certainly a relationship. But can you think of any love relationship where the external expressions are unimportant? If your wife came up and gave you a big hug and a passionate kiss, would you say, “What’s with all the external trappings and physical, outward

expressions of marriage? You're such a legalist. Don't you realize relationships are an issue of the heart, not external, physical rituals?" If you said to your wife, "Look, I don't give you flowers, I don't say, 'I love you,' I don't ever help you with the dishes or smile at you because those things are all outward, external things, and relationships are a matter of the heart," what do you think she would say? She might say, "You're right. Relationships are a matter of the heart. And obviously there's no love in your heart for me." You see, there is no such thing as unexpressed love. If it's not expressed, then there is no relationship.

And this is a good message for a church like ours, where we emphasize heart issues so much.

Here's why I say that: The church today is filled with shallow remedies. Preachers stand up and say, "Stop being so angry," but they don't help you discover the underlying heart issues causing your anger – like wrong attitudes about suffering or out of control desire. They focus on symptoms and not the disease. They say, "Stop worrying so much," but they don't teach you how find the root causes of the worry, like self-reliance or a wrong understanding of the nature of God. So often people deal on the surface with external actions, but they neglect the heart. And that is a huge mistake.

So a church like Agape comes along and presses hard on the importance the heart. We are really big on digging down and getting to the root. If your car is sputtering and won't go over 20 mph, you don't solve the problem by just hooking up to a tow truck that can pull you faster. If you really want to solve the problem you tear into the motor and figure out what's wrong there. That is what we do with our spiritual lives.

But there is a danger in that. As we react to the error of dealing only on the surface, we can go to for the other direction and focus *only* on the heart, and fail to give any attention to our actions. We focus so much on the root that we forget that the Bible really does have a whole lot to say about both root *and* fruit. And we can fall into the error of thinking any time we are dealing with actions, it's superficial. That's not true. Deal with the heart, for sure. But even after you have taken care of the heart issues, bearing fruit still requires some intentional effort. It requires thought and planning and work. Just fixing the engine doesn't make the car go fast – you have to fix the engine, and then actually get in the car and put your foot on the gas. Some Christians spend all day every day under the hood in their Christian life. They are constantly giving their heart a tune-up, but they never actually get in the car and put their foot on the gas and drive.

Review James 1:19-25 and memorize James 1:26. Say it 10 times word for word from memory, and then at least two more times later in the day.

Prayer:

Go back to the passage you read in Matthew 7 and talk to God about what you read. Ask Him to show you how that passage applies in your life.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Further Study:

The sermons on the text from Mt.7:21-27, "Judgment Day Surprise" and "House of Cards"
<http://foodforyoursoul.net/sermon/?bk=40&ch=7>.

Day 2

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Read carefully and prayerfully through Proverbs 10 and put a “T” in the margin next to any verse that mentions the tongue or speech. Ask the Lord to direct your attention to whichever one is most important for your spiritual growth right now.

Sermon segment:

James 1:26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his religion is worthless.

If you want to be a doer of the Word, take a look at your speech because doing includes talking. Being a doer of the Word means your talking conforms to the perfect law of God. You haven't put God's Word into practice until you start talking differently. Your religion - your way of worshiping God - has an effect on the way you dress when you come to church. It has an effect on the way you act when we are singing praise songs. But does it have an effect on what comes out of your mouth when the waitress messes up your order? Does your religion have an impact on what comes out of your mouth when someone cut you off in traffic? Does it have an impact on what you say when all your coworkers are gathered around complaining about the boss? Does your worship have an effect on what comes out of your mouth right after your spouse does something really disrespectful or unloving, or your kids are disobedient and break something really expensive? If not, James says, your religion is worthless.

That word translated **worthless** is a term that is very often used in connection with idolatry and paganism. If your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ doesn't have any impact on your speech patterns, it is no better than Hinduism or Islam or Buddhism or any other false religion. It is utterly unacceptable to God.

The people James is writing to had all kinds of problems in their speech. Hypocritical speech, hostile speech, slander, fighting, quarreling, judging. They are praying selfish prayers. They are boasting, they are swearing oaths, which is a mark of dishonesty. There are a lot of ways to sin with your mouth. James doesn't even address them all. There's also complaining, grumbling, gossip, profanity, obscenity, coarse joking, rude speech, mindless chatter – so many ways we sin with our mouth.

So what is James saying? If you ever do any of that then you are lost? No. In chapter 3 he says that we all stumble in many ways in our speech. He is not saying true Christians never stumble. But he is saying that if you are going to be a doer of the Word, it is going to have an effect on your speech, because talking counts as doing. Talking is part of your behavior. Talking is part of your religion. When Cain and Abel came to worship God, they both put a sacrifice on the altar. And one was accepted and the other was rejected. Whenever we open our mouths, what comes out is a gift laid on the altar as worship to God. It is either acceptable worship or unacceptable worship, but either way it is a part of our religious expression.

So if unbelievers send with their mouths and Christians sin with their mouths, what's the difference? Here is what it looks like in a fake Christian: Something happens, they get upset, a bunch of verbal diarrhea comes out of their mouth, and they just make excuses.

“I’m just really tired today.”
“I had a rough day at work.”
“You kept pressuring me and nagging me and you pushed me into it.”
“I didn’t really mean what I said.”
“You said plenty of hurtful things to me too.”

One excuse after another.

Or, if they want to reconcile the relationship they might make a more serious sounding apology. But there is no real concern about changing what is wrong in their heart. They just kind of shrug their shoulders, and say, “I’ll try harder next time.” But next time it’s going to be exactly the same because they haven’t taken any steps to change their heart. That is the rule rather than the exception in the life of the fake Christian when they sin in their speech. No real repentance.

What about a true Christian? What do we do after we have stumbled into sin with our mouths? You get angry, you give in to sinful impulses, a bunch of garbage comes out of your mouth, and then, at some point, you come to your senses. You realize you have displeased and dishonored God and you are grieved about it. You confess your sin to God and to whichever people were involved. No excuses, no blame shifting - just humble confession, and you ask their forgiveness. And so you search your heart to discover what heart issue was at the root of those sinful words. Then you look to the Scriptures to find out how to change your heart in that area. And you take some specific steps to change because you love the Lord and you want to be pleasing to Him. And because the Holy Spirit has convicted your heart and you want to be responsive to Him. And over time those steps will start to have an effect and there will be a difference in your speech patterns.

And it was probably that way in James day as well, which would explain why James calls it self-deception. The grammar of verse 26 actually calls for the word *instead* after the word *but*.

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but instead deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

There are only two options for the person claiming to be a Christian: bridle your tongue or deceive your heart. This is the third time James has warned us about self-deception. In verse 16 he warned us about being deceived by temptation. In verse 22 he warned us about being deceived into thinking that just listening and learning equals spiritual growth. So someone says, “Okay, I will be a doer of the Word.” And he starts doing all kinds of religious stuff, but there’s no change in his speech patterns - James says, “You’re right back to deceiving yourself. If you think you are a doer of the Word just because you’re doing all that religious stuff, and it’s not having an impact on your speech, you’re delusional.” Jesus was clear in Matthew 12:34 that the things that come out of our mouth come from the heart, which means it is impossible to have a good heart and a bad mouth.

Review 1:19-25 from memory word for word, and memorize James 1:27. Say James 1:26-27 ten times from memory word for word.

Prayer:

Go back to Proverbs 10 and talk to God about what you read. Ask Him to show you which proverb in that chapter is most important for you to put into practice today.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to put what you have learned from God's Word into practice.
- Check this box when you have done it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Day 3

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Read carefully and prayerfully through Proverbs 12 and put a "T" in the margin next to any verse that mentions the tongue or speech. Ask the Lord to direct your attention to whichever one is most important for your spiritual growth right now.

Sermon segment:

So what does it mean to bridle your tongue? Notice he says bridle, not muzzle. We've all heard the advice – If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all. A closed mouth gathers no feet. But that is not what James is saying here. He is not telling us to muzzle our speech; he's telling us to bridle it. A muzzle means just don't open your mouth. A bridle refers to control. If you put a bit and bridle on a horse, it's not so you can make the horse dormant and motionless. Just the opposite. The horse can still walk and run and jump and work and do all kinds of things. The difference is, with a bridle the horse is under control so that it can be useful. Without a bridle it just does whatever it feels like doing.

The tongue is an incredibly powerful thing. Think of the power you have in your mouth. You can open up your mouth and present the gospel to someone and the result could be that they spend eternity in heaven instead of in hell. You just stand there and say some words and it can result in eternal salvation. The tongue can bring healing, comfort, wisdom, insight, encouragement, strength, renewal, and life. But it can also bring pain, confusion, discouragement, devastation, and death. It is like nuclear power – it can provide electricity for a whole city or blow up a whole city.

So what determines if your tongue is a bomb or a power plant? Self-control. If you are a Christian, you have lots of good desires. You desire to glorify God, to honor the Lord Jesus Christ, to show love to His people, to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord - all kinds of good desires. And we also have sinful desires, don't we? James talked about that back in verse 14. And typically, it's the sinful desires that are realized when we just act on impulse. And obtaining the good desires requires some self-control. If you don't exercise self-control with your tongue, it will just run around like a wild horse acting on impulse. And it will be like a bomb blowing up a city. But if we really love God, we are going to want to harness that energy and put it to good use. That is what it means to bridle your tongue. Instead of just speaking

whenever you have an impulse to speak, give careful thought to how you can accomplish good things with your speech.

Review 1:19-27 from memory word for word three times today.

Prayer:

Go back to Proverbs 12 today and talk to God about what you read. Ask Him to show you which proverb in that chapter is most important for you to put into practice today.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to put what you have learned from God's Word into practice.
- Check this box when you have done it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Day 4

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Read carefully and prayerfully through Luke 10:25-37. Ask the Lord to give you insight – beyond the things you have noticed already in the past about this passage.

Sermon segment:

James 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...

Orphans and widows represent the most helpless and needy among us. Throughout Scripture you see God having special care and compassion for orphans and widows. Anyone who is in trouble and has no one to help them protect them or provide for them draws the most tender compassion from the heart of God. And if you are a true child of God, it will draw your compassion as well. The very first organized ministry in the church is a ministry to widows in Acts 6. The book of 1 Timothy is all about how to run a church, and 22% of that book is devoted to ministry to widows. God cares about people who are in need. And if my religion doesn't extend as far as my wallet and my daytimer, that it is not acceptable to God. If you have some kind of faith in Jesus Christ that doesn't move you to help those who are in need, it's worthless.

This is nothing new with James. God made this crystal-clear all the way through the Old Testament. In the very first chapter of Isaiah, the people were offering sacrifices and carrying out all the things God had told him to do in the Temple. They were doing all the rituals God had told him to do, and yet it was not acceptable to God. In fact God couldn't stand it, because they weren't also caring for orphans and widows.

Isaiah 1:13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations— I cannot bear your evil assemblies. 14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates.

17 learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

When you see someone in trouble, and your heart is not moved with compassion to help that person, your religion is defiled and unacceptable in God's sight. Compassion for those in need and a giving, generous heart is a mark of true faith in Jesus Christ.

Matthew 25:34 “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ ... 40 ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

Care for the needy is fundamental to Christian faith. It is one of the most natural things in the whole Christian life. When we first planted this church, at the very beginning before we had any children's ministry or youth ministry, before we even had live music - right from the very start we had a benevolence ministry. Most of the time when I try to start something new it flops. But starting the benevolence ministry was easy. All I had to do was say, “If anyone wants to give to help people in need, put some money in the box and write benevolence on the memo line.” And people did it, and they've been doing it ever since. We have never had to badger or cajole you to give to benevolence. I mention it once in a while, but we never make a big push. And yet there has never been a single time in history of our church when someone had a need and we had to tell them, “Sorry, there's no money in the benevolence fund.” Giving to help those in need is one of the most natural things you can do as a Christian to express your love for Christ. And if you would like to do more than just give money, you would like to give some of your time and really help people face-to-face, I would urge you to join the benevolence team. That is a ministry that is so close to the heart of God.

If you're thinking about adopting an orphan, that is one of the sweetest acts of worship of the Lord Jesus Christ you could possibly do. The same goes for volunteering at Life Choices crisis pregnancy center, or doing what you can to save babies who are going to be killed by their mothers. If a child's parents are dead, we should have compassion on that child. But if a child's parents want him dead, that's even worse!

And James is telling us, if that kind of thing doesn't move your heart enough to step in and do something, your religion has flat lined.

Review 1:19-25 from memory word for word three times today.

Prayer:

Pray for the people you know of who are especially needy, and ask God to show you what He wants you to do in the area of helping the needy.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to put what you have learned from God's Word into practice.
- Check this box when you have done it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Day 5

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Read carefully and prayerfully through 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. Ask the Lord to give you insight.

Sermon segment:

James 1:27 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.

Doing the Word includes separating from the world. The term "world" refers to the lifestyle of unbelievers. The dominant, accepted way of living and thinking and feeling in the culture around us – that's the world.

Each society creates its own makeshift morality. They don't want to submit to God's way so they invent their own system of right and wrong. Becoming stained by the world is when you start buying into that system.

For example, here's our culture's makeshift morality: Pride and self-esteem are considered virtues. God says they are evil. In our culture, anger is reasonable or unreasonable based on how much you've been hurt. If someone hurts you in a really big way, you're justified in being angry. God says all selfish anger is sin, and we are to remain softhearted and kind even toward our enemies. Our culture says sex between consenting adults is perfectly natural and there's no reason to restrict it to marriage. God says there are two options: get married or stay celibate. Our culture says the American dream is all about money and possessions and climbing up the ladder at work. God says money and possessions are a dangerous trap and they can never make you happy, and the goal in life is to move down the ladder to

become everybody's servant. Our culture says there might be a God out there somewhere, but he's not involved in day-to-day life. Life is what you make it. God says whether you eat or drink or whatever you do it must be done for His glory. Our culture says that the most reliable source of truth is science. God says the most reliable source of truth is His Word. Our culture says that profanity and obscenity are cool and funny. God says it's vile and He forbids it.

The problem is, when you listen to enough of their music, and watch enough of their movies and TV shows, and read enough of their books and blogs and magazine articles, and you develop friendships with them and hang out with them long enough, their ways of thinking start to leak into your soul. The writers in Hollywood are so incredibly skilled at taking those worldly ideas and making them seem reasonable good. And we can get so that when we present God's Word to people we almost feel like we need to apologize for it because it sounds so ridiculous. When you expose yourself to the world's influences enough so that your heart begins to attach itself to them, that is what it means to be stained by the world. You are stained by the world when it leaves its mark on you - it leaves its mark on your attitudes and desires.

And one of the marks of true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is a constant, concerted effort to avoid that. We are to walk through this world and come out unspotted and unstained. Imagine a surgeon who operates on someone dying of some terrible, infectious disease. After the surgery, when he walks out of there, is he stained with blood or infected with the disease? No - he was careful to wear gloves and a mask and gown, so that he walks out completely unstained. That's how we are to be in the world. Too often we immerse ourselves in this world without any precautions to protect our hearts.

A lot of Christians have a hard time taking this last one seriously because it sounds to them too much like legalism or fundamentalism. They say, "We are supposed to when the lost. We need to get down in the trenches with unbelievers to win them to Christ. So if I do that, along the way I pick up a few habits, say a few four letter words, drink a little too much - what's the big deal? Christianity is not just a bunch of rules, and I have freedom in Christ..." People think that way and so it's hard for them to think of worldliness as being that big of deal. What they fail to realize is that your relationship to the world is a mark of loyalty or disloyalty to God. James will explain that in some more detail in chapter 4. The picture that James paints is that God is the husband, we are the wife, and the world is another man. So any love or attraction we have to the world is like committing adultery against God. Worldliness is bad, not because you are breaking traditions or rules, but because you are being unfaithful to your husband in heaven.

If some attractive woman tries to seduce me, my answer should be, "No. I'm married. And I'm going to remain faithful to my wife." And if the world comes along and wants me to talk like them and think like them and share their values and attitudes, my answer should be, "No. I belong to God. I'm going to remain faithful to Him." Avoiding worldliness is all about your relationship with God.

Will we stumble? Of course. But if we love the Lord we will repent when that happens, and declare war on our adulterous attraction to the world. The phony Christian is content to just remain as he is.

"I will come to church, and I will read my Bible, and I will sing the songs and take communion, but religion needs to stay within those boundaries. I don't want it sticking its nose into my bedroom. It's not going to dictate what I do for living. It's not going to restrict my vocabulary when I'm having fun with my friends. It's not going to worm its way into my finances - I have enough trouble paying the bills as it is. I'm happy to be religious and believe in Jesus Christ as long as He stays in His place and leaves the rest of my life alone."

James says, "If that's you, the faith that you think you have in Jesus is absolutely worthless."

Review James 1:19-27 one time from memory

Prayer:

Go back to the portion you read in 2 Corinthians today and talk to God about what you read. Ask Him to give you a heart of loyalty and faithfulness to Him.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to distance yourself from worldly influences on your heart and commit to it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.