



Undefiled Religion

Real Faith.
Real Life.

LESSON

5

Week of February 5

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27).

Devotional

In our day, many have said that Christianity is a relationship, not a religion. Oftentimes, such a claim works to set the Christian faith apart from all other belief systems. When this statement is made, it is assumed that “religion” is something invented by man to provide a way through which he can work out his own salvation. “Relationship” is viewed as something initiated by God in Christ for the sake of a salvation that mankind could never earn.

If we understand “religion” and “relationship” this way, then there is nothing wrong with the claim that Christianity is not a religion. However, we must be aware that in our individualistic culture, people might be tempted to think that someone can have a personal relationship with Jesus and have no concern for others. While a personal relationship with Jesus results in salvation, if it is a true relationship, it will always move us to care for others.

It would also be a mistake to think that the Bible always defines the word *religion* in such a negative way. After all, the Bible does use the word *religion* in a positive sense to refer to the outward manifestation of a true saving relationship with Jesus Christ. We see a fine example of this in today’s passage where James gives us three ways in which we can recognize pure religion. The bridling of the tongue, the care for widows and orphans, and keeping oneself unstained from the world are all demonstrations of the pure religion that flows from authentic faith in Jesus (James 1:26–27).

Last week, we saw that if we are not doers of the Word we deceive ourselves. Today’s verses explain how we can be doers of the Word. If we do not control what we say, allow the world to pollute us, or ignore the needy among us, we are not doers of the Word and have deceived ourselves with respect to the authenticity of our faith (vv. 26–27).

On the one hand, we should not think that such things exhaust the content of true religion. But, on the other hand, if we do not obey these commands, we should ask ourselves about the veracity of our relationship with Jesus. Over the coming months, we will examine these themes closely as James brings them up again in his letter.

CORAM DEO (In the presence of God)

Does your relationship with Jesus impact others? Do you know when to bridle your tongue for the sake of edifying other believers? Does your relationship manifest itself in a religion of service that helps to provide for widows and orphans so that they will come to know Christ? Does your love for Jesus motivate you to stay away from moral impurity? If the answer to any of these questions is no, strive to avoid the sins of an unbridled tongue and the neglect of the needy.¹

Open it

1. When you were growing up, what were some of your thoughts or feelings regarding church life or organized religion?

Read it

JAMES 1:26-27

Explore it

2. What happens to your religion if you can't control your tongue?
3. What two qualities does James use to describe authentic religion "before God"?
4. Whom does "pure religion" seek to serve?
5. What does "pure religion" do to our relationship with the world?

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/undefiled-religion/>

Apply it

OLD TYME RELIGION

Søren Kierkegaard, Danish philosopher and theologian, once said, “The human race in the course of time has taken the liberty of softening and softening Christianity until at last we have contrived to make it exactly the opposite of what it is in the New Testament” (Attack, 39). I agree with Kierkegaard in that we try at every turn to define Christianity on our terms instead of on the terms of God outlined in the New Testament.

I am convinced the deep, dark secret of our religious subculture in the southern United States is that we want Christianity and we want church on our terms, according to our preferences, aligning with our lifestyles. We are a people happy to go to church just so long as nothing in our lives has to change. We are a people glad to be Christians just so long as we can define Christianity according to what accommodates us. The only problem is that in order for the religion of Christianity to be authentic, true, and actually acceptable before God, we have to let Him define what it looks like. **And His definition of religion, His definition of true Christianity, is radically different from ours.**

In this section of James, we are going to see a New Testament explanation of faith and religion—**the kind of religion that honors and is acceptable to God**—and we are going to be faced with a choice. Are we going to define religion on our terms and settle for a Christianity that appeals to our lifestyles? Or are we going to submit to God’s terms for what faith, religion, and Christianity look like in our lives, in our families, and in our churches? Be careful how you answer. Martin Luther said, “A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”²

6. What causes followers of Christ to define and evaluate the validity of their faith on their own terms instead of God’s?

7. How does the world define a "religious" person? How does that compare to the Scriptures?

² Platt, David. Exalting Jesus In James (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 511-529). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

8. What types of things do we use to prove the genuineness of our faith? How do these things fall short of truly proving one's faith?

The word "religion" doesn't have a positive connotation in many circles, and it really isn't used all that often in the New Testament. But James is introducing a section here where he's going to show us that true religion is characterized by a lifestyle of obedience to God.³

Sometimes we, as evangelical Christians, can be very quick to dismiss the word "religion" as always being a negative, manmade thing. **It's not**—and that's one of the points James is making in these verses. As believers, we should not be so quick to throw out the baby with the bath water. What we need to do is discern between false and superficial religion from that religion which is based solely on an authentic, genuine relationship with Jesus...⁴

9. It is popular to say that instead of having "religion" we have a "relationship with Jesus." How can this distinction be helpful and how can it hinder how we and others see our faith?

10. How does knowing that we practice our religion "before God the Father" change how we might approach and participate in religious activities?

WATCH YOUR MOUTH!!!

The first mark of true and acceptable religion is controlled speech that displays a changed heart. James makes this point in 1:26, one of many times he talks about our speech (see especially 3: 1-12). Keep in mind that James leans heavily on what Jesus taught in the Gospels. Jesus clearly taught that what we

³ Platt, David. *Exalting Jesus In James (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 511-529). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Sermon by Tony Miano found at <http://bibleoutlines.com/library/pdf/james.pdf>

head, without listening to or caring about what others are telling them. They are too full of their own self-important ideas. **Such people are not open to the Word of God.** They are not open to those God has appointed as teachers in His church. We must read the Scriptures ourselves, but we must also listen to teachers, or the Bible will come to simply mirror our preconceived ideas. The test of submission to the Word is openness to what is taught by those appointed to teach the Bible in the church. A person who is full of his own words will not be open to the words of others.

13. Earlier in his letter James told us to “Be quick to listen and slow to speak.” How can being uncontrolled in our conversation affect our ability to hear God and His Word?

14. During our study on temptation, we learned that being tempted is very common to people. In what areas are you tempted to use your mouth in a way that contradicts God’s Word?

HELP THE HELPLESS

We don’t just see the need and then walk away after saying a few good words. Bob Rowland pictures the problem in his poem “**Listen, Christian!**”:

I was hungry and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. Thank you.
I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar and prayed for my release.
I was naked, and in your mind, you debated the morality of my appearance.
I was sick and you knelt and thanked God for your health.
I was homeless and you preached to me of the spiritual shelter of the love of God.
I was lonely and you left me alone to pray for me.
You seem so holy; So close to God. But I’m still very hungry.

We can never substitute another church service or even more Bible reading for rolling up our sleeves and getting involved in this hurting world. **True religion sees the distress of the world and then moves to meet that need.** James singles out two groups that deserve special attention: orphans and widows. Then he adds a qualifying phrase—“in their distress.” **He means those who are alone and forgotten.** They are

in distress precisely because they have no one to care for them. This echoes a familiar Old Testament theme⁶:

"Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless" (Exodus 22:22 NIV).

"Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows" (Isaiah 1:17 NLT).

"Do not oppress the widow or the orphan" (Zechariah 7:10 NASB).

15. What are the distressing aspects of a widow's or orphan's life? Why do prayers and words of encouragement fall short of addressing their needs?

16. What keeps loving Christians from helping the orphans and widows that are around us? When have you gotten beyond these hindrances to serve those in need? What happened as a result of your actions?

The religion God approves cares for those who cannot care for themselves. It includes the widows and the orphans, but it doesn't end there. It must include the unborn, the sick, the dying, the homeless, the disabled, the immigrants, the victims of sex trafficking, prisoners, refugees, and many others the world would rather overlook.⁷

17. In what ways does your church minister to those who cannot help themselves. How can your church create a greater focus on meeting the variety of needs and distress that they face?

TRY TO STAY CLEAN

"To keep" (*tereo*) means to keep an eye on, keep something in view, to attend carefully, or to watch over it. This speaks of guarding something which is in one's possession. It means to watch as one would some

⁶ Sermon by Ray Pritchard entitled **Three Signs Your Religion Is Real** found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/three-signs-your-religion-is-real/>

⁷ *ibid*

precious thing. The idea is to observe attentively, to keep watch over and to retain in custody. James' use of the **present tense** calls for believers to exert constant vigilance to remain undefiled.⁸

18. What types of stains does a Christian risk getting on himself when engaging with the world? How does one practically guard himself from being stained by the world?

19. How do we strike a proper balance between engaging the world and our need at times to separate from the world? On which side of engagement/separation do you seem to land most often and why?

In all these things we have the example of Jesus who left the beauty of heaven for a barnyard birth. He left behind the purity of heaven to rescue us from the impurity of this world. He walked among us, lived with us, talked with us, ate with us, laughed with us, and wept with us. He rubbed shoulders with gluttons and drunkards. He knew the Pharisees and called them hypocrites. But He never became a glutton or a drunkard or a hypocrite. The prostitutes evidently knew Him, and recognized in Him a kind of man who was different from all the others they had known. Because He was the Son of God, He lifted the fallen but did not fall Himself. **If we are to obey what James has taught us, we need Christ living in us.** We will never bridle our tongue, or reach out to the hurting, or keep ourselves unstained by the world in our own power.

We need Jesus!!!⁹

20. Which of the three areas that James addresses in our text do you struggle with most? How can the example of Jesus help you to find victory in the days to come?

⁸ http://www.preceptaustin.org/james_126-27

⁹ Sermon by Ray Pritchard entitled **Three Signs Your Religion Is Real** found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/three-signs-your-religion-is-real/>