



VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Real Faith. Real Life.

Part 5: Sights and Sounds: Authentic Religion
That Pleases God

James 1:26–27 | Tim Badal | February 12, 2017

We've been studying the first-century letter that was written by James, the younger half-brother of Jesus. We are learning from this incredibly practical book what it means to have real faith in real life. It's a book that puts on workman's clothes. It has been called "The Proverbs of the New Testament" because it's packed with wisdom on how to live life.



You'll notice that our artwork is intentionally meaningful, depicting people who are doing tasks that we would consider mundane or menial—things we don't think of as having spiritual ramifications. Yet we're learning that God's Spirit wants to lead us in every aspect of our lives. He isn't just giving us instruction for our Sunday life together. Rather, the book of James—along with the rest of the Bible—is intended to teach us how to live well on Monday through Saturday, at work or in our schools or communities, with our family and friends, and even with strangers.

Point by point, verse by verse, James gives us clear instruction on how to have real faith for real life. Remember the flight attendant illustration? A flight attendant knows that because of the weather the ride might be a little bumpy. They'll recommend that we keep our seat belts fastened for the entire flight because of potential turbulence.

James contains 108 verses, and although we're only one chapter into it, it's already gotten a little bumpy. We may have hit turbulence in places we'd prefer to avoid. But we need to realize that in 108 verses, James gives 59 commands. He's throwing in one after the other: do this, do this, do this. We might feel like we're just working on one command, when already James is giving us another—before we're ready for it. He's incredibly practical, and he doesn't pull any punches.

While this may seem to be a hard book, it doesn't really come to us from a hard taskmaster. As we learned last week, James also reminds us continually that we are beloved, first by him as the writer, but even more importantly, we are loved by the God of the universe. He cares for us and gives us good things. His commands and exhortations are those of a loving parent, not designed to bring us into bondage or to knock us down, but to give us the wisdom to live a life He will bless.

As we look to our future decisions, we know we want God's blessing, and we want the life that God will put His stamp of approval on. To help us with this, the Holy Spirit, through the writings of James, is giving us 59 commands that will guide us to making that blessing a reality. So we must not allow ourselves to wallow in our feelings of inadequacy, feel cut down or beat up, but rather be challenged not to settle for the cultural Christianity that James was addressing.

There was a culture that was very similar to ours today. We can tend to think that as long as our spiritual life is a little bit better than our neighbor's life, then we're doing okay. If we don't swear like he does, then we're okay in God's eyes. If we don't fall for the sin and debauchery we see around us, if we don't watch the same programs or listen to the same music—well then, we're doing better than they are.

Let me remind you that our self-evaluation needs to be based not on what our neighbors are doing—whether good, bad or ugly—but rather it should be based on what James' Brother said. Jesus said, "I want you to be perfect just as My Father in heaven is perfect" (Leviticus 20:26; 1 Peter 1:16). I don't know about you, but when I hear that, I gulp. "Perfect? I have a hard enough time being good." But James tells us in James 1:4, "*Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete.*" Echoing Jesus' words, James too wants us to become perfect and complete.

We know from the Scriptures that that won't happen on this earth—but that doesn't mean it's not the standard for which we should strive. We can't be spiritually perfect in this life because we never stop struggling with sin. Because of Christ's work on the cross, you and I are perfect in our standing with God in heaven. He paid for our sins, we've been justified, and now we are in the process of being sanctified—that is, being made more like Jesus Christ each day.

James is giving us guidance on how to reach for that goal of perfection through the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to be moving in the right direction, even though we may at times fall by the wayside. But we are reminded that God is a giver and a lover Who wants to pick us up and clean us off, so we can continue on our journey.

This is something we need to remember, because James is going to hit us right between the eyes. He'll be saying things like, "Your religion is worthless," and "You deceive yourselves." If we don't interpret this properly, we could find ourselves with concerns and doubts.

We'll only be looking at two verses, which focus on our calling to serve the helpless and be compassionate. This would include our call to help unborn children, and those who find themselves with unwanted pregnancies. God has a heart for these people, and for widows and orphans. As James says, we need to be not just hearers of the Word, but doers, tangibly showing the compassion God has given us.

Let's read our verses and see what James has to tell us:

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.

Notice the three things James talks about. If we want to be authentically religious:

- We need to keep a tight rein on our tongues.
- We need to find and visit orphans and widows in their affliction.
- We need to keep ourselves unstained from the world.

The Badal family likes to watch TV. Some people don't, some do—we're a TV-watching household. But it can be hard to find programs that my 14-year-old likes and that are also appropriate for an eight-year-old. We have fallen in love with what are called "docu-dramas." These are documentaries in which actors depict real-life events. I would commend to your family a show that was originally on National Geographic and is now on Netflix called "American Genius." There are about ten episodes that chronicle the role Americans played in revolutionizing our world through various technological inventions. This includes the Wright brothers who built and perfected the airplane. Another episode shows the invention of electricity and light bulbs. There's always a back-story in each program.

One episode we recently watched, which our boys absolutely loved, was about the invention of the television. Did you know that this invention started in a high school class in Idaho around 1924? A young high school student named Philo Farnsworth had fallen out of love with the radio. He was an avid baseball fan, and while he could at that time listen to sports programming from all over the United States, he wanted more than just hearing what was happening in the games.

So this teenager had the audacity to ask, "What if you could see and hear what was going on hundreds of miles away? Wouldn't the experience be so much greater if you could see it with your own eyes?" Philo began the journey, and in the middle of lots of competition he gradually created the technology that would bring both sight and sound together. He lived to watch the television revolutionize the way we do life. Because he was so young when he invented the television, he had the opportunity to watch Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walk on the moon. We are not content with only one dimension of experience. It's not good enough to only hear things. We want the sounds and the sights, and television has made that a reality.

You might be wondering why, in our study of James, I'm bringing up the invention of the television. It's because our Christian life is designed not just to be heard, but also to be seen. People don't just need to hear about it—they need a visual picture as well. Far too

many of us talk about our faith, but people rarely see in action what they hear us say. We have a lot of “radio Christians,” if you will, and not enough “TV Christians” who put sight and sound together. James is saying that if we want our Christianity to be authentic, it must deliver both the sound and the picture of growing maturity, of a life that is becoming more like Jesus so they can see Him in and through us. Our words need to be backed up with things that can be seen. Our faith must be tangible.

In James 1:22 we’re told that we must both know the Word and do the Word. If we know the Word we can share it with others, but people also need to see us living it out on an ongoing basis. So in essence James is giving us a test to determine if our religion is pure and undefiled. Some of us, if we take this test, may discover that we’re all talk and no action. We talk about our relationship with Jesus Christ, but at the end of the day our lives are not changed. We’re not moved to a place of action. James says if that’s the case, your religion is worthless and you’re deceiving yourself.

So let’s first look at what he means by the word “religion.” We might think that because the Bible is a religious book, that the word religion would be used over and over again. While the words religion or religious occur three times in just these two verses, you might be surprised to learn that they occur only two other times in all of Scripture. The Bible doesn’t talk about it very often. But obviously James considers it important that we understand what religion really is. For us of course it’s a word we commonly use. In fact, we’re often told that it’s one of the two things we must stay away from in social conversation—politics and religion. Yet James breaks that rule and directly addresses the question of whether or not we’re religious. In our day, we often hear people avoid using the word to describe themselves. I remember a rock group when I was growing up that called themselves “Bad Religion.”

In this passage we see religion spoken of both negatively and positively. Negatively, James describes a religion that is worthless. We’ve seen that ourselves. We know people who go through the motions but who have no real love for Jesus. They practice lots of rituals for many reasons, but they neglect to honor or worship God. That is offensive to us. How can they just go through the motions?

Jesus confronted the religious leaders of His day who believed themselves to be undefiled and totally spiritual. Jesus called them “whitewashed tombs,” pretty on the outside but having nothing inside but dead men’s bones (Matthew 23:27). What’s seen on the outside doesn’t truly represent what’s actually on the inside. We know people at work or in our community or on Facebook who talk about being religious, but then they do all manner of sinful things. There seems to be no connection between what they say they believe and what they actually live out. So religion in that sense is understandably worthless.

What then is a religion that James could call “pure and undefiled”? As evangelicals, we may have bought into the idea that religion is bad. I’ve heard people say, “I’m not religious, but I have a relationship with Jesus.” I understand why they say that. They want to separate the outward form from the personal relationship. But you need to realize that you can’t have a relationship with Jesus and not be part of a religion. We are part of a religion—an outward expression of a faith. We are participants in the Christian religion. Now, of course, we want to be part of the Christian religion that God views as undefiled, not a religion that is worthless.

Remember a few years back when a young man named Jefferson Bethke went viral with a spoken poem, “Why I Hate Religion But Love Jesus.” It had millions of views. As I listened to what he said, I realized he had thrown the baby out with the bathwater. He didn’t realize that there is a religion which God considers pure and undefiled. God doesn’t hate all religion; only certain kinds of religion.

So we need to realize we are part of a religion that seeks to honor and worship God. Our religion should mean that what we say provides a framework for what we do. Even though we may act imperfectly, we need to acknowledge that we have been a “bad advertisement” for a good religion and that we were wrong in that. So it isn’t that we should or shouldn’t have a religion—the question is what religion do we have?

First, let’s give a definition for religion. Religion is the outward expression of one’s faith. It’s important that we avoid interpreting the Bible through a faulty understanding of the terms it uses. We need to look for the way God interprets these terms. So when you read that someone’s religion is worthless, right away someone here might conclude, “If I don’t keep a tight rein on my tongue, if I don’t look after orphans, and if I am stained by the world, then I’m going to hell. Even though I profess Christ, if I don’t do these things, then God is saying my religion is worthless.”

That’s not what James is saying. Nowhere is he implying that your salvation is at risk. James knew the word “salvation” —he’s just not using it here. He intentionally chooses the word “religion,” the outward expression of one’s faith. When he says, “Your religion is worthless,” he’s not addressing your internal status but rather the external expression of your faith. He’s saying, “If you have bowed the knee to Jesus Christ but your walk doesn’t match your talk, you are still saved.” The Bible says once you’re in the Father’s hand, no

one can snatch you out of it (John 10:27–30). So James is not saying if you don't do these three things, you are therefore unbelievers. Instead, he's saying that the outward expression of our faith isn't doing us any favors.

Right now for some of us, our religion is doing us no favors at all. We're followers of Christ, but we're not good advertisers of Christianity. We are creating hindrances rather than helping others understand what it means to be a Christ follower. Remember, he's writing to his brothers—and we know he does not mean his kin. So now in verses 26 and 27, he's telling these believers that while they aren't losing their salvation, they might risk their lives by being bad examples of their faith for others to see.

Further, James is not saying that these three things he mentions are the totality of what it means to be a Christian. He's using them as examples. He's not saying that everyone who doesn't help with orphans is a failure. Nor is he saying that if you're a Christian who struggles with your tongue, then you're an abject failure. These two verses appear in the context of five chapters which talk about a lot of other aspects of Christian living, and the book of James itself is only one of 66 books filled with many more chapters that explain what following Christ means. Sometimes, we take one passage—such as Micah 6:8 which says, *“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*—and think that's all we have to do. No, we're called to much more as followers of God. These are simply good tests to help us assess whether we're on the right track.

High school students nationwide are required to take one of two tests: the A.C.T. and the S.A.T. When you take that test, are they questioning you on the totality of your educational experience to that point? No. They're taking the core ideas and turning them into questions to evaluate the general proficiency of a student in certain specific areas. That allows them to judge the overall educational success of the students. Is it perfect? No. I got a 14 the first time I took the A.C.T.—and I'm brilliant. Right? The test isn't always right. These tests help us get a baseline for where we are.

These three principles in James are important because they serve as a baseline for knowing what true religion should look like.

1. Authentic religion looks inward: through conversation with others

The “inward” question asks, “How am I doing in my conversation with others? Do I have a true religion? Is my religion worthwhile? Is it undefiled? Well, let's see how I'm doing at talking with others. Verse 26, *“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.”* James focuses on our tongues, and he isn't making that choice out of thin air. He actually has proof within the early church assemblies that there are real problems with people's tongues.

If Joe Christian walks into the church and is speaking all kinds of horrific words and curses, but at the same time says he's a follower of Jesus Christ, James wants him to know that what he says is directly connected to what he's doing as a Christian. James will actually pick this up in greater detail in chapter three, so I'll save a lot of what this entails for that sermon.

But notice a few things here. The reason James uses the tongue as something that reveals our faith is that we are called to take possession of it. It's a personal thing. You own your tongue. *“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.”* Four times James refers to a person, not to a corporate group. You own your tongue. You own the words that come out of your mouth—and so do I. We can't blame others for what we say. We can't blame God for what we say. We can't blame the devil for what we say. But just as it says earlier in this chapter, we are tempted when we are enticed by our own desires. If we have anger or frustration in our hearts, if we want to tell a salacious story or gossip or swear, that doesn't start in the tongue. The tongue is connected to the heart.

Besides our tongues being personal, James is also telling us that our tongues aren't to cease, but simply need to be controlled. Why is that? God gave us a tongue for a variety of uses. We're to encourage and build others up. We are to share the truths of God. Romans 10:14 makes it clear that the only way people can know the good news of Jesus Christ is to hear it spoken. Someone has to open their mouth and use their tongue to articulate God's truth.

God loves it when we use our tongues for good purposes. Both He and we realize that every good thing which He has given us is supposed to be used for the good of others. But with that comes the temptation to use God's good gift in harmful ways. James isn't telling us to stop talking, but rather we are to “bridle” our tongues—control them—as we'll see in chapter three. What God intends for us to use in a controlled way can become like a raging fire when it's not controlled.

Why does James want us to bridle our tongues? Because the tongue is the window into our souls. It displays what the heart is thinking. We can't see our hearts or examine the hearts of other men. We can't know someone else's motives. The tongue declares what's in the human heart. My kindergarten teacher put it this way: "If you have garbage on the inside, one day it will come out." Jesus said it better, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."

Our words are connected to our hearts, and when we talk to people, we're telling them what we're thinking and feeling. We may try to cover our feelings or deceive others—but at the end of the day, our tongues are going to reveal the secrets of our hearts. They're connected. Our tongue can't say one thing while our faith—our religion—is doing another.

So this is where we need to be careful. Because if our mouth is advertising one thing—"I have a relationship with Jesus Christ, and I love God and His work"—but then out of the other side of your mouth comes all kinds of hurtful, hateful and ugly things, the people who are looking at you are going to wonder what kind of religion you have. As James 3:11–12 says, "How can salt water come from a fresh water well? How can you bless and curse with the same tongue?" Our religion then becomes a hindrance rather than a help for those around us who are trying to understand what it means to follow Christ. Isaiah 29:13 says, *"This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me."* We can talk a good game regarding our relationship with God. It's always easier to talk about it than to live it out.

In banking terms, what we're doing is "bouncing checks." When you write a check for a certain amount to purchase something and give it to the seller, it's assumed that they can take the check to their bank and that amount will be put into their account. But if we write a check knowing there is no money in our account to back it, that's similar to what we're doing when we talk of our religion but our hearts don't back it up. When we present people with an outward expression of faith and they take it to God, He might say, "That has no value." When people see my life and Amanda's life—when they take to God what they've seen us model—I pray that He will stamp it as approved and say, "Yes, this is the currency you're looking for. This is the faith and holiness you've been desiring."

But for far too many of us, our tongues get in the way. As Isaiah said, we are a people who draw near with our mouth and honor God with our lips, but our hearts are far from Him. Our religion, the outward expression, has no value when seen only in word but not in deed. Do we believe the message we preach? Do we believe Jesus changes lives? Sadly, far too many of us love to sing and proclaim things on Sunday, but when we head out on Monday, other words come out of our mouths.

Paul reminds us that the Kingdom of God is not just a matter of talk, but of power. So the crux of James' message here is that it is unthinkable for us to profess that we have a life in God but then remain unchanged. Our faith, our religion, has a job. James uses the illustration of a horse's bridle that goes into its mouth. The bit in a wild horse's mouth is what causes it to be subdued and led. He is saying that we know an animal has been tamed when we are able to control it through its mouth. But many of us are wild broncos without a bridle on our tongue. We may tell the world we're submitted to Jesus, but they can see our tongues bucking all over the place.

One cannot be true without the other. If our tongues are not helpful, they're a hindrance. We have people who are living out religion in word but not deed. Be careful—the outward expression of your faith will then be worthless. It's a bad bounced check.

2. Authentic religion looks outward: through compassion for others

Once we've looked inward through our mouths, we now ask about our outward compassion for others. James 1:27 says, "If your goal is a pure religion, then not only do you need to watch your words, but your hearts need to be drawn to show compassion to others." If our religion is real, it will exude from every part of us. If our heart is right, if it has been transformed by Jesus, it will lead us to action. You will be motivated to do things that in and of yourself you would not do.

These are things James learned from his Brother. We read in the Gospels that when Jesus saw the crowds of people, He had compassion on them. He saw that they were hurting and harassed, sheep without a shepherd. Jesus was reflecting the mind of the Trinity. We also read throughout the Old Testament that God has a heart for hurting and oppressed people. He has a heart for the fatherless and the widow, for the sojourner and refugee. God longs to care for and minister to them.

That's why we are also called to compassion. Again we turn to Isaiah, this time in Isaiah 1:11–17, to see the heart of God:

¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

He's saying, "Don't give Me your fake religion. I've had enough of that."

¹² When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? ¹³ Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. ¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. ¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, ¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

God does not want more worship through ritual or activity that doesn't hit the heart. Instead, He wants hearts that are given to the things He's given to—compassion.

James instructs us to *"...visit orphans and widows in their afflictions."* That word "visit" was used of our Savior twice in Luke 1, when Zacharias, prophesying of the coming of the Messiah, says, "The Lord will visit His people..." We might think it just means saying "Hi" and interacting for a little while. But when we think about Jesus visiting His people, He didn't just hang out with us for a little while. Rather, visiting in this context has three characteristics.

Visiting is a ministry of closeness.

Jesus took on flesh and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14). We are called to minister to the fatherless and widows in their distress "up close and personal." We're to make them our kin, a part of our family. Why? Because relationships have failed them. We need to redeem that loss by becoming related to them. When ministering to orphans and widows, you can't just phone it in. It's not done from a distance. Jesus had to leave heaven and come to earth to visit us.

Visiting is a costly ministry.

When Jesus came to visit, it ultimately cost Him His life. If you talk to those who have adopted children or who have ministered to orphans and widows in their distress, they will tell you it's costly. It isn't easy. It takes time. It takes money. It takes emotional, spiritual and relational capital. There are times when visiting those in distress will cause you some distress. It caused distress for Jesus. He came to redeem us, and it cost Him His life. It cost Him fellowship with His Father. It cost Him everything He left in heaven. He laid everything aside to endure the price of visiting us (Philippians 2:5–11).

Visiting is a critical ministry.

If Jesus had not visited us, we would be eternally lost. James says that if no one ministers to the orphans and widows—if no one reaches out to them, if no one comes to their aid—they will be lost. Just as Jesus left His throne in heaven, we need to leave our throne and minister to people who are in critical situations. They need help. Without help, they have no hope.

James tells us that the reason we are to be involved in close, costly and critical ministries to orphans and widows is because this is an example of untainted religion. When you minister to an orphan or widow in their distress, there's nothing they can give back to you. No one can question your motives. How is helping an orphan going to elevate you in this world? People don't care about orphans. What good does it do you to help a widow in her distress? In James' day, these individuals were the lowest of low.

He is saying that untainted religion gets down and gets its hands dirty, helping those who will never be able to repay you. No one will be able to say you're doing these things for any ulterior motives. You're doing it because you are trying to live as Jesus Christ told us to—to serve rather than be served, looking to the least of these in their distress.

That's why we have told you about ministries like Pregnancy Information Center, where the most helpless among us—the unborn—can be helped. That's where we can help those who find themselves with an unwanted pregnancy. If we want to prove our faith here at Village Bible Church, we need to lock arms with ministries like that. What does it gain us? It gains us nothing—but that's the proof of the pudding. It isn't about us; it's about people who will never be able to pay us back for our service to them.

We're all called to different kinds of ministries, including adoption-type ministries. I've been so blessed to see several of our families serve by sponsoring a child through Juna Armagara or Compassion, where the needs of helpless children are met. Plus some of our families have made forever homes for adopted children. Or consider our Aurora Ministry, where we are able to minister to refugees.

I don't want to get too political, but our hearts should break for refugees. I understand the need for our government to protect our people, and I totally think that's a legitimate role for them. But as Christians, our hearts should break for the people who are running for their lives with no place to live. Don't ever let your politics defile your religion. God loves the broken. God loves the fatherless. God loves the person who no longer has a spouse. God loves the unborn. True and undefiled religion looks after the people God loves and loves them as well.

3. Authentic religion looks upward: through conduct before God and others

The inward, the outward and now finally the upward. We need to ask, "How's my conduct before God and others?" James exhorts us to keep ourselves *"...unstained from the world."*

Yes, we can help widows and orphans in their distress, but we need God's help to do all of these things. Our love for God won't change who we are, unless we allow that love to change our conversations, our compassion and now our conduct. Everything we do is in the presence and sight of God. Religion that is faultless and undefiled "before God"—He is the audience. He's watching and taking stock of what He sees. Does God say your faith, and my faith, is unstained? Are we doing everything in our power to keep clean? Are we presuming upon the grace of God, therefore sinning all the more so grace may abound more? (See Romans 6:1–14.)

Because God is our audience, action is required. We are "to keep"—present tense. It's something that goes on all the time, something that is always happening. The word means to guard or keep watch, just like a prison warden would do. He keeps watch over the inmates, knowing that the second he allows them any kind of freedom, there would be a mutiny.

So to make sure our souls are unstained means to keep watch over those desires and longings, knowing that if we let them go, they will get the best of us. Notice, it is our job. James tells us to "keep oneself." We can't blame Mom or Dad or Pastor or brother or sister or our friends.

Without going into too much detail, last night my oldest son learned how bad company corrupts good character. He learned the valuable lesson that it's not his friends' job to keep him pure. It's his job. He has to own it. And what is good for a 14-year-old is good for a 40-year-old. I have to own what I see. I have to own what I say. I have to own where I go. And I can't get mad at the devil. I can't get mad at the world. I can't get mad at the temptations. I have to get mad at myself, admitting that it's my fault that I'm tainted and stained by this world.

So what am I going to do to make sure that doesn't happen? What's the antidote? Knowing the Word and doing what it says. Psalm 119 tells us we keep ourselves pure by meditating on and knowing the Word of God, doing what it says. You and I will never have pure religion without the Person and work of Jesus Christ living in and through us. So don't just do tasks. We can do religion and not have Jesus. Instead, allow your relationship with Jesus to form your religion. Then say, "God, when I miss it, I want You to hold me accountable. When my tongue gets out of control, I want You to bridle it. When I become stained by the world and my compassion begins to wane, God, please speak into my life. I want You to address these things, so that how I advertise my faith might not be worthless, but instead be pure and undefiled."