

James 1:26-27

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[0 : 00] James chapter 1, our text for today is verses 26 and 27. Last week we considered James' words from verse 22 of chapter 1, but be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving yourselves.

And the case that followed and established at length that while we can only be saved by grace alone, through faith alone, that having been saved, said salvation will evidence in good works. We will live lives that show that we have in fact been changed inside. We are different now than we once were. And the Bible is replete with these kinds of exhortations and these kinds of warnings. And James is very concerned about this matter. The proof that we have Jesus as our Savior is a life that expresses that Jesus is our Lord.

It's a life given to him. And we talked at length last week about biblical sanctification and that process of growing in holiness. We don't just arrive at holiness.

[1 : 15] It comes bit by bit through the regular means of grace and by the power of the Spirit. But you need to know that it is entirely possible to think that you are a Christian, but to be deceived about the condition of your heart.

And James is going to continue this theme throughout his letter. And he certainly does so today in these two verses. So we'll read verse 26 and 27.

But before we do, and because this is the most important part of the time that we have set apart for the sermon, the time that we read the word.

Right? These are God's very words for us. That's why I remind you that this is God's word to us. That it was written for his glory and our good. And so we would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and to obey its commands.

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

[2 : 23] 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.

Now I think that before we can make any meaningful progress in our understanding of today's text, we need to first define some terms.

Specifically, what does James mean by religious in verse 26 and religion in verse 27? Both of these words have as their Greek root the Greek word *threskos*, which means given to religious observance or outward signs of worship.

Which in this case likely means the attendance of the gathering of the church as he's exhorted the church to be quick to hear and slow to speak.

But it could also include things like reading the right books, singing the right songs, listening to the right preachers, giving to the right causes, etc.

[3 : 32] Those trappings, those things that can be very good things, but things that we can place our hope in. We can be doing all of these things and think ourselves properly religious.

Kent Hughes, a contemporary pastor in his commentary on James said, Our doing can produce a deadly religious delusion.

So caught up in doing good things that we think we are saved. James is working at the very heart of this. This thought process and this opportunity we have to deceive ourselves.

He seeks to correct any improper thinking about these matters all throughout the letter. And today in verse 26 and 27, which we'll study in the following three points.

Number one, true worshipers, the true worshiper controls their tongue. Number two, the true worshiper helps the helpless.

[4 : 43] And number three, the true worshiper lives an unpolluted life. So the true worshiper, the one who isn't doing things merely to be seen by others, the one who isn't doing things to find their acceptance before God, but the one who is doing things out of a grateful response for what God has already done for them.

The one who has been saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. The one who has cast all of their hope and trust on the completed work of Jesus Christ.

Then, acts. Out of that confidence, out of that acceptance, then acts. Out of that confidence, in Jesus Christ, in Jesus Christ, He picks up this metaphor of bridling.

You put a bridle into the mouth of a horse to direct its way. A large and powerful animal, right? Being directed by a small and much less powerful human, right?

Able to steer the animal where it will go. So if a man thinks that he is properly religious, thinks that he is appropriately worshipping God, and yet doesn't control his tongue, then he's being deceived at heart.

[6 : 28] Are our tongues under our control? And he says this outward appearance of religion is worthless. It is without gain for this person.

Now, this is not the only place in James' letter that he addresses the tongue. We'll pick it back up again and again throughout the text. But I just want to show you the place that's most emphatic, where he uses this bridle metaphor, which is found in chapter 3, beginning in verse 2.

Where he writes, So we suggest that the tongue is the thing most difficult to control.

If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire.

[7 : 44] And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell.

We cannot know the exact circumstance that James is writing to in these believers' lives, but they must have been a mess with their tongues.

We certainly live in a day where information moves at an incredibly rapid pace, where it's difficult to know what is or isn't true. A day where words are being redefined right before us.

It's incredible the way in which the tongue can shape things, can destroy things, can build things up. And as Christian people, we ought to be a people so devoted to the truth, so engrossed with who Jesus is and the things that he said, so filled with the Spirit that we are careful with our tongues.

If you want to be discouraged about the American church, you can follow some people on Twitter. There are pastors who are just flatly unqualified for their activity.

[9 : 03] on social media. It's a shame the way we speak to one another online. Paul was also very concerned about the Christian's use of the tongue.

It's not just James, so I'll show you a couple of other examples. Paul warns against filthy talk. He says in Ephesians 4, 29, let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

So what's the opposite of corrupting or filthy talk? It's talk that builds people up, that brings grace to them. He warned against lying, just flat untruth.

Ephesians 4, 25, therefore having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

He warns against gossip, which is meaningless talking about somebody else. Often it's untrue. 1 Timothy 5, verse 13, this is in regards to some idle, the word just left my mind.

[10 : 21] It's going to come back to me in just a second. Be patient with me. It's in our text. Widows. Thank you. Idle widows.

Besides that, they learn to be idlers going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.

Paul warns against slander, which is just saying things that are untrue of someone. Colossians 3, in verse 8, but now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

He also warns against flattery, speaking things that are untrue of somebody, that are a lie about how great they are. Romans 16, 18, for such persons do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their

own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery, they deceive the hearts of any eve. So the tongue is a concern of the scripture, that we would speak truth, and that we wouldn't speak falsehood. And so many of us need to be so careful with our tongues.

[11 : 37] Jesus, our Lord, says that our tongues are evidence of the condition of our hearts. Matthew 12, verse 33 and following. He said, Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.

You brood of vipers, he's speaking to the Pharisees here, How can you speak good when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.

What we say gives evidence to who we are. We sing a song with the kids sometimes on Sunday morning called Good Fruit by a group called Rain for Roots.

I would encourage their music for you and your children. And the chorus of this song, So Very Good, Children, you may know it, goes like this.

Your heart is where the words of your mouth grow. Your mouth is where the thoughts of your heart go. Jesus, change our hearts to bear, to bear good fruit.

[12 : 52] Straight from this text. Jesus says that what we say gives evidence to who we are. And this should cause us to shudder, to really think about what we say and how we say it.

Do you have a bridled tongue? Because if you don't, what James here is saying is that your religion is worthless. This does not mean necessarily that you're not in the faith, but it is a place for repentance.

It is a place to ask the Lord to correct you. How is it that my tongue is not bridled, that I don't speak things that are consistent with the truth? Show me that I might repent.

Correct my language. Be pleasing to you. If Jesus Christ has saved your soul, you will want to please the Lord with the way that you use your words.

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

[14 : 03] Secondly, the true worshiper helps the helpless. This is the first part of verse 27. Religion stated in the positive now that is pure and undefiled before God, the father is this to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.

So outward expression of worship, right? They cannot be questioned. It's pure and it's undefiled. It is righteous before God, the father to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, their trouble, like their times of trial.

The widow and the orphan were the most destitute categories of people in ancient Jewish society. These were people who were without a social safety net. They were without planning and care.

They just had no resource any longer for their concern. These were people who had, through the unfortunate loss of their parents or their husband, been left destitute.

Without anybody to speak for them, without any help whatsoever. And so the church, in its early days, stepped in and began to do an amazing, God-honoring, God-empowered work amongst the orphans and the widows.

[15 : 25] This is why we see the church of Ephesus caring for widows under Paul's instruction to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 5. This is an active work of the church.

They were taking up the cause of the orphan, the child on the street. They were homing these children as an extension of God's love for them. And beloved, we are still meant to care for the most helpless of our day.

We ought not let our government's social security network make this, all of our problems go away. Hold everything at an arm's length.

Live the life that we want to live and not be concerned about those who need our help. Pure and undefiled religion is expressed in this way.

Finding those helpless and being a helper to them. Turn with me, if you will, please, to Isaiah chapter 1. Begin reading in verse 11.

[16 : 43] Listen to this rebuke of God to Israel. We ought to consider its application for the church today. God says, What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

Right? Outward worship, says the Lord. I haven't 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.

When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Now, it's important to know that all of the things that have been mentioned by God were prescribed by

God in the worship of God.

But they're not taking care of things that matter most. Outward signs, not changed hearts. Verse 13, the Lord says, 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. Your new moons and your appointed feasts, my soul hates.

[17 : 58] They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. 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. And then he gives them the response to this, right? I will not bear with you any longer in this condition, but, verse 16, wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes.

So repent and cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Correct oppression. Bring justice to the fatherless, the orphan, and plead the widow's cause.

God is pleased when changed hearts do a work that is honoring to him in the world. Not merely the trappings of religion.

And it is good for us to come together, right? It is good for us to open God's word and to pray and to preach and to hear and to sing. All of those things are good things for us to do.

[19 : 09] They ought to be bolstering things, building things, equipping things so that we can go out into the world and live lives. The show that God is our God.

That Jesus Christ has saved our souls. And we want to bring reconciliation. We want to bring redemption. We want to see peace established in the hearts of those people that we encounter each and every day.

So we must ask, who are the most helpless of our day? We have widows in our church, and they need love and care like everybody else does, but they may not be the most helpless of our day.

There are others, though. We need to be thoughtful about this. Who are those who have no voice? Who are those that need the church to speak for them?

Who are those who need us to come alongside, to love and to serve, to show them the love of Jesus Christ? Are you individually, are we as a church, doing all that we can to do good and to seek justice and to correct oppression?

[20 : 20] And I would just say, beloved, that we need to seek the Lord with humility for what more we can do as a church. I know many of you love your neighbors well.

What more could we do as a church so that our religion will be pure and undefiled, right? We want this to be the case before God, right? The God who has loved us so immensely in Jesus Christ, we want him to be pleased with our worship.

And thirdly, the true worshiper lives an unpolluted life. Last part of verse 27, James is not being unreasonable here.

He is not trying to say to us that we will be perfect. This is not at all what he's communicating. What he's saying is that the true worshiper will be about this work, right? Will be putting off sin and putting on righteousness.

Will be avoiding the things that tend to taint our souls. We live in an increasingly corrupt world. This world is going off its rails.

[21 : 32] It is astounding. I don't know how many of you even have TV. We don't in our home, but our in-laws do and the kids go over. We have to be careful about the kids' channels these days and what kind of information is being propagated on the kids' channels.

It's astounding. Pay attention to the messaging that is coming across to us. It seems that Isaiah's lament in Isaiah chapter 5 and verse 20 has come true.

He says, Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

This whole world just seems so terribly turned upside down. And as Christians, we are meant to be those who live, turning it right side up.

We are those who take in good in the world, right? That we might share that with others. We need to make very careful decisions about what we take into our homes and what we take into our hearts.

[22 : 39] You need to pay attention to the way the things you consume affect the way you feel, speak, and act. We will do well to be left out of a conversation about the latest episode of some dumb TV show for the sake of our souls.

It's okay to say to your friends, Nope, I don't watch that. And then tell them why. It's garbage and it's bad for you. It's an acceptable thing to say.

We need to be mindful about what it means to keep ourselves unstained from the world. To live in it, but to not be of it. So that we will be, as a church, a city on a hill.

So that we will carry a witness of the goodness of God and the personal work of Jesus Christ to everyone. At the end of our days, we are not going to look back on our lives and wish we had done more of the pointless stuff.

We won't for a minute think, man, I just wish I'd spent more time consuming, watching TV, doing those types of things. We will not care about that.

[23 : 47] We will wish rather that we'd spent more time taking in the word, sharing the word with others in prayer. I think it was John Piper that said, the one good thing that Facebook will do for the world is prove that we had time for prayer.

We need to set ourselves to the things of God. Beloved, this life is but a vapor. It is coming very quickly and it will pass on. In our weakness, we're most reminded of this.

This morning, I kind of feel like I need to go lay down right now. You have felt that way. Much of our church is not here because they've got people who are sick. The curse of this world runs rampant.

Right? And it should be reminding us that we don't live for this world. We live for the world to come. Right? We invest now into dividends that will pay out forever.

We don't want to find ourselves being false worshipers. Right? Having a religion that is worthless. Right? We want to be people who set ourselves, all of ourselves, the entirety of ourselves, for the glory of God in the world in which we live.

[24 : 59] Note that James tells us that true worshipers will be concerned not just with their religious formality but with the activity of their mouths, of their hands and feet, and of their hearts.

Their whole being devoted to the Lord. The true worshiper controls their tongue, helps the helpless, and lives an unpolluted life.

Please join me in prayer.