

JAMES 1:26, 27

WHAT THE FAITH LOOKS LIKE

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

The story is told of a little boy who asked his father, “Daddy, what is a Christian?” After pondering this question, that father gave a somewhat extended answer. He told the lad about salvation through faith in Jesus the Saviour, and he explained that Christians worship Jesus and live to honour Him. He explained that because a Christian is born from above, he is compassionate and generous, willing to be involved in helping all who are in need. When the father had concluded explaining what a Christian is, the little lad looked up and asked, “Daddy, do we know any?”

There are times that each of us may be tempted to ask whether we know any Christians. The tragic truth that is not often declared is that each of us is capable of living in such a manner that we dishonour the Name of the Saviour at times. Though saved by the grace of God through faith in the Lord Jesus, we are fallen creatures; and but for the grace of God, we would all be under sentence of death. However, God, in mercy, has redeemed those who believe on His Son; and having redeemed them, He appoints them to serve Him through exercising the gifts that He has given each one. Together, we unite in communities of faith where we worship the Risen Son of God and build one another in this most holy Faith. We also reveal the presence of the Living Saviour through doing the work that Jesus did when He was in the flesh.

Wherever the Faith is found, you will discover the Body of Christ, which is His church. How will I recognise the Body of Christ? The true Body of Christ will be busy doing the things that the Saviour did when He was in the flesh. Was Jesus compassionate? Then the Body of Christ will reveal His compassion toward those who are vulnerable and weak. Was Jesus truthful? The Body of Christ will both speak the truth and live the truth as revealed through the Word of God. Was the Lord Jesus bold in confronting sin? Wherever His Body is found, you will witness people who boldly live for His Name’s sake as they rebuke evil.

This is the essence of James’ statement in the verses that comprise our text for this day. He speaks negatively to rebuke the tendency for those who name the Name to Christ to reduce their religious affections to mere words; and then he speaks positively to remind them of what the Faith consists. Join me in exploring James’ teaching that together we may build a church to the glory of the Father and to the praise of Christ the Lord.

A POPULAR VIEW OF RELIGION — “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” It will be beneficial for us to place this portion of the Word in context. In order to do that, let’s read the preceding verses. “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

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“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing” [JAMES 1:19-25].

James’ immediate concern was to encourage Christians who were even then being horribly persecuted to live godly and holy lives. He is focused on the reaction, whether verbal or physical, of believers to unjust attacks. Just as they needed to be encouraged to be holy, so Christians today must be encouraged to be holy. Godliness is more than mere piety; godliness is discovering what is pleasing to God in a given situation and courageously doing what has been discovered. Holiness is not optional for the child of God; holiness is mandatory. The Apostle Peter writing the same Christians, wrote, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” [1 PETER 1:13-16].

Undoubtedly, each of us has known someone who justified their refusal to believe because of the failure of professed Christians to be godly. Perhaps we ourselves have at one time expressed serious reservations about openly confessing the Faith because of a negative view of Christianity that resulted from people whose lives disgraced the Name of Christ. Tragically, Christendom is filled with examples of precisely such people; and we ourselves have perhaps at times inadvertently disappointed someone through a thoughtless word, or a careless deed, or because we failed to live up to the standard expected by the world.

In this past year, many of us witnessed a tragic display of unbridled tongues. People who have a reputation of being religious, people who clearly boast among themselves how religious they are, came to a church meeting with hatred in their hearts and determination to hurt others. The effect of their bitter calumny was more destructive than had they thrown a grenade into the meeting. Professing to be deeply concerned about newer believers, their actions drove most of those newer Christians from participating in their religious exercises. James would say of such people that they are self-deceived and that their religion is worthless. The damage done through godless speech is far more lasting and far more detrimental than any of us could imagine.

The popular view of religion appears to be that it is to be minimally intrusive on the conduct of our lives. Religion, in the estimate of the masses within Christendom, must not inconvenience us. In fact, religion, according to many, must affirm us in the way we now live. Religion must never be permitted to make anyone feel badly about their lifestyle, it must make us feel good about our worship without intruding on any other aspect of our lives, and it must permit us to imagine that God is pleased to have such great people as us worshipping Him.

Frankly, there is little to distinguish between much of modern religion and the Pharisees of Jesus’ day. In an extended passage recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus excoriated these advocates of religious precision. I will not read the entire passage, but I do ask you to note the reference and read it for yourselves. Then, consider what Jesus said, applying it to those who exalt themselves today. The scribes and Pharisees impose heavy burdens on others, perform their religious duties publicly and in an ostentatious manner. They have exaggerated opinions about themselves and the honour they claim is essentially self-generated [MATTHEW 23:2-12].

Their actions are detrimental to the growth of the Kingdom, for though they gather adherents for themselves, they shut the door to the Kingdom in the face of those who seek God. They gather proselytes, but they are unconcerned about making disciples for God’s glory [MATTHEW 23:13-15].

They create new religious tests that make them feel good about their pitiful efforts, and they impose those tests on others, thinking that in doing so they honour God [MATTHEW 23:16-22].

They are ever so careful to “pay the tithe,” for money is the mark of their devotion. They constantly seek more from those about them so they can do what they want to do, but in their mad pursuit of acquiring goods for their own religious efforts, they have neglected the very things that God desires and which honour His Name—justice, mercy and faithfulness. They are masters of minutiae, though they have yet to fulfil the commands of God [MATTHEW 23:23, 24].

They are crooked—self-serving thieves that promote their own interests. Icily precise in the conduct of their religion for one hour on Sunday, they are devoid of righteousness the remaining 167 hours in the week [MATTHEW 23:25, 26].

Of these religious frauds, Jesus said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” [MATTHEW 23:27, 28].

The Master concluded that these religious phoneyes were one at heart with those who had murdered the righteous in the past. He concluded His condemnation with these excoriating words that surely must have stung, which when rightly applied to smug, religious hypocrites today, must still sting. “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth” [see MATTHEW 23:29-36].

Man seems to have concluded from earliest days that religion consists of what one does to impress the gods. However, God who gives us life and who has called all things into being, informs us that what pleases Him is less what we do than who we are. We naturally endeavour to make religion easy, attempting to eliminate all sense of guilt through our own efforts; so, we conclude that we can give money, or recite prayers, or sing songs, or perform some ritual, and thus placate God. God, however, says that we need changed hearts as evidenced through a godly life. Since no man can change his heart, we must depend upon God to transform us.

This point is stressed throughout Paul’s writings. Listen to a few instances where the Apostle emphasises the necessity for a transformed life. Writing the Corinthians in his first letter, Paul cautioned, “Neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God” [1 CORINTHIANS 7:19]. He had first advanced this warning to the churches in Galatia, where he insisted, “Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” [GALATIANS 6:15]. And this was an iteration of something he had written earlier to these same churches. “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision carries any weight—the only thing that matters is faith working through love” [GALATIANS 5:6 NET BIBLE].

Underscore in your mind that your actions, divorced from a transformed heart, are meaningless. What you do will never deliver you from divine condemnation—you need a changed heart. You cannot live a life that is good enough to deliver you from condemnation. You must be born from above; and those who are born from above demonstrate the reality of what God has accomplished through a holy life.

This truth is sufficiently important that I am convinced that I must press it home by pointing you to the clear Word of God. Consider what the Apostle of Love has written on this issue. In his first letter, the Apostle John penned, “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness.”

“You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” [1 JOHN 3:4-10].

We do not live holy lives in order to be saved; but because we are saved we will live holy lives. We do not do good deeds in order to be children of the True and Living God; but because we are children of the True and Living God we will do good deeds. A friend of mine used to say that a sheep may fall into the mud, but a sheep will not lay down in the mud. It is not perfection that is in view, but a willingness to be perfected. Mark in your mind the individual whose life is indistinguishable from the world about him, and you may take it that such a person needs to consider whether they have ever known the Master. Note the individual whose speech is damning and contemptible, and you see an individual whose religion is useless.

GOD’S VIEW OF RELIGION THAT IS PURE AND UNDEFILED — “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.” We have spent enough time reminding ourselves what is commonly done among the disobedient who have infiltrated Zion and who imagine that for all their religious exercise they have impressed God. Now we must consider what God would see produced in us by the power of His indwelling Spirit.

James has grown progressively more practical and specific in his call for Christians to respond appropriately to the word of God. Translating the Greek text, we see that James has warned us to “receive the Word” [VERSE 21], which then became “do the Word” [VERSE 22], and at last has become “do the Law.” VERSES 26 and 27 culminate this progression, as James suggests three ways in which believers can do the Word, which is the “perfect law.” These three manifestations of obedience to the word introduce or touch on key ideas that James will return to again in the letter—speech, service, and sanctification.² A life that reflects the transforming power of the Risen Son of God is a life that is aware of speech, service and sanctification.

Douglas Moo is undoubtedly correct when he suggests that the idea of VERSES 26 AND 27—that true religion is manifested in a lifestyle of obedience to God—becomes the leitmotif of the next four chapters. To some extent, then, these verses set the agenda for the rest of the letter. Because this is true, it is vital that we focus on these two verses and ensure that we understand their significance. To accomplish this goal, I focus your attention on the three areas of life previously named—*speech*, *service* and *sanctification*.

Negatively, James assailed the unbridled tongue, warning that it reveals a practitioner of error. Positively, he will soon assert that a transformed life knows and harnesses the power of the tongue. In just a few short verses James will write, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body” [JAMES 3:1, 2].

² See Douglas J. Moo, **The Letter of James, The Pillar New Testament commentary**, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2000) 95

Service is the second area of life that reveals that one has embraced God's righteousness. James addresses this by speaking of practical Christianity. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." Compassion for the vulnerable is throughout the Word of God evidence of a mind submitted to the will of God. In the Old Testament, the Lord was especially pointed in speaking of the responsibility of His people to care for widows and orphans.

By no means will I exhaust the instruction God provides concerning widows and orphans by a quick review of the Old Covenant, but some of the passages that should recommend themselves to us are these that follow. Before ever they reached the Promised Land, God commanded the people of Israel to show compassion for widows and orphans. "You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child" [EXODUS 22:22]. Near the end of his days, Moses revealed the character of the Lord when he wrote, "[The Lord] executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" [DEUTERONOMY 10:18].

Within the Psalms is a powerful caution to avoid wickedness toward the vulnerable.

"Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand;
forget not the afflicted.
Why does the wicked renounce God
and say in his heart, "You will not call to account"?
But you do see, for you note mischief and vexation,
that you may take it into your hands;
to you the helpless commits himself;
you have been the helper of the fatherless.
Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer;
call his wickedness to account till you find none.

"The LORD is king forever and ever;
the nations perish from his land.
O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted;
you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear
to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed,
so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more."
[PSALM 10:12-18]

In the midst of caring for what we imagine to be the great issues of life, God is concerned about widows and orphans. The oppressed of the earth merit His compassion. He will not ignore them forever, and woe to that individual who thinks to injure those who are vulnerable.

Isaiah, writing years after David and long after the time of Moses, also reviewed the nation of Israel as it then stood. His condemnation served to place the issue of the treatment of the vulnerable in a right perspective.

"Learn to do good;
seek justice,
correct oppression;
bring justice to the fatherless,
plead the widow's cause..."

“Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not bring justice to the fatherless,
and the widow’s cause does not come to them.”

[ISAIAH 1:17, 23]

A constant theme among the prophets is that God does not tolerate taking advantage of the vulnerable. Through Jeremiah, God warned, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place [JEREMIAH 22:3]. Zechariah cautioned the people of his day, “Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart” [ZECHARIAH 7:10]. As the canon of the Old Testament was drawn to a conclusion, God’s concluding word to mankind was, “I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts” [MALACHI 3:5].

As an assembly of the Lord, we are obligated to serve one another in love, by this means fulfilling the will of God; but we are also responsible to show love toward the most defenceless within society through compassionate service to relieve their need. This means showing respect for those who are truly in need. Let me be practical and suggest that it means shovelling snow from the widow’s driveway and walk, providing a model to the fatherless and encouraging them to be godly, ensuring that those among us who have genuine needs are cared for. I have said it before, and I will say it yet again—it is a blight on the Faith of Christ the Lord if one of our own people should ever be required to accept welfare.

I do not favour welfare as it is practised in our world today. Throwing money at people in need creates dependency and is inefficient. However, working to care for the needy in a practical sense is godly. Assisting those who have difficulty budgeting what they have, working with our people to manage debt, ensuring that all have sufficient food to eat and providing needed repairs to their homes and vehicles demonstrates the presence of Christ in our lives, when it is coupled with a holy life. And that introduces the next point that James addresses.

The final evidence of pure religion acceptable before God is a sanctified life. The concept of sanctification is foreign within contemporary religion. The emphasis in modern religion is doing what we want without restraints. We imagine that we can write our own rules and set our own standard for righteousness, and that God will smile benignly and ignore our sin. However, we know that those who are redeemed are changed; they cannot continue to live as they want, for they received God’s Spirit when they submitted to Christ as Lord of life.

Paul declared, “This is the will of God, your sanctification” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:3]. Then, he becomes quite pointed in applying what he means by urging sexual purity, refusing to defraud fellow believers. The reason for this admonition is that “God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness” [1 THESSALONIANS 4:7]. This teaching is emphasised in the Ephesian Letter. There, he writes, “Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving” [EPHESIANS 5:3, 4].

There is perhaps no finer summary of God's expectation concerning our sanctification than what Peter has provided. "Preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.' And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" [1 PETER 1:13-19].

ACHIEVING RELIGION THAT GOD APPROVES — "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 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." What does Faith that is acceptable to God look like? What would we, as a congregation, look like if we grasped James' instruction and obeyed them?

Remember that the three areas of concern are speech, service and sanctification. The church that reveals God approved Faith—practising religion that is pure and undefiled—is a congregation that is conscious of the power of the tongue. That church will make every effort to build through speaking the truth in love. It does not mean that we will ignore error or refuse to rebuke sin, but rather, in love we will hold one another accountable before the Lord. We will not dismiss wickedness among us, but in love, we will expect the best of one another and encourage each other to fulfil the calling each one has received by living holy lives.

When our religion is pure and undefiled, from the pulpit and from the pew each member of the assembly will make every effort to build up, encourage and console each one who is participating in the life of the Body [see 1 CORINTHIANS 14:3]. In a religion that is pure and undefiled, the people will demand that the pulpit provide a message from God—sound exposition of His Word that builds the people and confronts the wicked in their sin. Then, having been instructed in righteousness, the people will make every effort to reflect the purity of what God has provided through His Word by building one another in this most holy Faith.

Pure religion and undefiled before God, the Father, seeks to honour God with the tongue. There is, in the Book of Malachi, a beautiful passage that I would apply to each of us as children of the Living God. Malachi wrote, "Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before Him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed His Name. 'They shall be mine, says the LORD of Hosts, in the day when I make up My treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then, once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him'" [MALACHI 3:16-18].

God takes note of all who build one another through speaking of His mercies and of His goodness. Those who speak thusly are builders and not destroyers, distinguishing them from others who do not serve God. However, the Lord God promises that He will make an even greater distinction between those who know Him and those who merely pretend to know Him when He makes up His treasured possession consisting of those who are redeemed. This statement anticipates the words of the Master recorded in Matthew's Gospel. "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" [MATTHEW 12:36, 37].

Among the professed people of God is a need to reign in our tongue, seeking to build one another rather than trying to injure one another. We must seize control of our speech so that Christ is honoured through the manner in which we speak, rather than being torn down or discouraged. The destructive speech of professed Christians has turned away many who were weighing the Faith. Gossip and slander and just plain hostile speech dishonours Christ and exposes the speaker as one who holds a worthless religion.

Similarly, we must learn to serve one another in love. I remind you of an essential truth concerning the church of Christ the Lord. Those who are redeemed are entrusted with gifts that are given to build up the Body into which the Spirit places each one. None among the people of God are without divine enablement that glorifies the Saviour when it is employed to build and encourage and console. The gifts you possess were given to be employed for God's glory and for the benefit of others within the Body. To do otherwise is to prostitute the gift of God and to dishonour Him who gave them to you.

However, even in the areas in which you are not necessarily gifted, you are yet responsible to serve others. The example of the Master is that of a servant. Jesus said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" [MATTHEW 20:28]. Indeed, the Lord "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant" [PHILIPPIANS 2:6b, 7a]. On one occasion, Jesus found it necessary to rebuke His disciples. That rebuke provided opportunity to instruct all believers about God's expectation for His people.

"A dispute also arose among [the disciples], as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves'" [LUKE 22:24-27]. It is time for us to cultivate the spirit of servants if our religion will be seen as pure and undefiled.

Finally, "religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father" will be revealed through keeping "oneself unstained from the world." God expects His people to be holy. The author of the Letter to the Hebrew Christians commanded those who read that letter, "Strive for ... the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" [HEBREWS 12:14]. Whatever else a holy life entails, it must include "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience" [see COLOSSIANS 3:12]. Moreover, the individual who lives a life reflecting sanctification will be patient and forgiving, and he will have "put on love" [see COLOSSIANS 3:13, 14]. The sanctified life will reflect peace with God and demonstrate respect for the Body of Christ [see COLOSSIANS 3:15]. The individual who lives a sanctified life will be filled with the Word of Christ, expressing gratitude in all things, and honouring the Lord Jesus in every endeavour [see COLOSSIANS 3:16, 17].

I long to witness a church where pure religion and undefiled before God, the Father, is esteemed and practised. This will be evident because the people comprising the congregation build one another with their speech, and encourage and console one another through what is said. This religion will be unlike the old religion that is merely external because it will be revealed through a Body that serves one another in love, outdoing one another in showing honour, and always upholding one another in prayer. This new religion for our day will be expressed through holy lives of those sharing in this Faith, as each one accepts the responsibility to discover the will of God and boldly fulfils the will of God. The feelings of the worshippers will not be easily hurt because they will have already died to self in order to be truly alive to the Saviour. My prayer is that this church will be the church I envision, and we will be the people glorifying God's Name.

Wherever such a church is found, souls will be saved. And that is our message to all who are willing to receive it. Believe on Christ the Lord and be saved. We do not present to you a religion that calls you to do, but we call you to a Faith that is done. Christ has died for your sin and was raised for your justification. Now, He calls you to believe this message of life and hope. The Word of God is quite clear in declaring that, “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart one believes and is declared righteous, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That word concludes by inviting all to call on the Name of the Risen Son of God, for “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13 author’s translation**].